



In the Wake of the Pandemic, Employee Well-Being Moves Front and Center

Description

Living in Pensacola, Florida, since 1996, I have gained experience with hurricanes. I know what it's like when they hit. There is the fear of the impact, the preparation for the storm, the actual storm, and then the rebuild. Right after the storm, depending on how hard it hits and in what areas, there are a variety of reactions. Depending on the situation, people's emotions range from profound sadness over the destruction to relief if no one has been killed or injured. There is also a sense of digging in together, of neighbor helping neighbor. More emotions arise when the power comes back on, when roads are cleared, when roofs are repaired, etc. The feelings vary from person to person.

Now we are living through a pandemic. What I've seen is that while there are some similarities between the pandemic and a hurricane, there are also vast differences. The pandemic was not as trackable as a hurricane. In a hurricane, it is clear from the start what people need to do to protect themselves due to past experiences. Not so with the pandemic. Also, with the pandemic, "neighbor helping neighbor" at times could not happen physically due to the possibility of infection. A hurricane moves by quickly. The pandemic is still with us.

What both scenarios do have in common is that, for many people, there is no bouncing back to normal. After a hurricane, it may not be possible to rebuild the house. The company may not be able to reopen. Many people deal with depression. After Hurricane Ivan hit in 2004, my wife and I went to the homes of employees as well as other people we knew. One person was sitting on the stairs of her house that had been heavily damaged. As I spoke with her, it was clear she was showing symptoms of shock. She needed professional help, which she received.

With the pandemic, even as things get better, there will still not be a "we are back to normal" scenario in all cases. Certainly there is ongoing stress and sometimes trauma.

Over the past several months, I have done numerous virtual talks on well-being, stress, and trauma. Well-being is that sense of "I have this." Life goes on as normal. When we are experiencing stress, there is a period of anxiety and worry, yet depending on the time involved, it usually goes away. Long-term stress is, of course, damaging.

There are times when we move beyond stress and into trauma territory. While stress upsets our balance in the moment, we can get through it and get on with our life. Trauma is very different. A traumatic event sends us into “fight, flight, or freeze” mode. It actually changes how we look at the world. With stress, we know that things can get back to normal. With trauma, things will never get back to how they were.

In my talks on the subject, I have introduced some tools companies can use to help assess and navigate stress and/or trauma. The first one has the employees rate where they feel the company is on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being “fine” and 10 being “we cannot take it anymore.” With the pandemic, over half of the workforce is rating their company at 7 or higher. This means there is a very high level of stress, with some parts of the organization in trauma.

What does it mean when an organization is in trauma? Generally, we cross over into trauma when communication and trust have broken down. People feel overworked and underappreciated. They may feel hopeless and at times helpless. They may even behave in aggressive, self-destructive, or other uncharacteristic ways. People may even divide into factions, and the organization may become polarized.

In a traumatized organization, things will likely not go back to the way they were before. Yet the good news is companies that open the discussion and use this tool are already on the road to healing. Asking the question is the first step.

The next tool I share with organizations is from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. It is an individual diagnostic tool that firefighters/emergency medical personnel use to assess themselves and take their own mental health temperature. It has four different phases: Thriving, Surviving, Struggling, and In Crisis. After the overall rating has been determined, everyone in the organization meets with their direct supervisor to discuss where they feel they are on the spectrum. Again, this tool opens the door to a healthy conversation.

My experience is that most companies’ benefit plan will show that one of the top three medications employees are taking is an anti-depressant. It is good that people have access to medicine; however, it is better if they also receive additional help. Most companies also offer an employee assistance program that can provide additional resources. Sadly, the EAP is one of the least-used benefits. For any company to be a healthy one, the stigma around reaching out for help for mental health issues must be eliminated. The process above lets people know it is okay to seek help.

The last tool I recommend is a stress and resiliency guide. This tool kit was first completed by TriHealth, a healthcare system based in Cincinnati, Ohio. With their permission, the Studer Community Institute has added to it. Contact me, and we can make the “Resilience & Well-Being in Stressful Times” tool kit available to your organization at no charge.

While hopefully the worst is behind us with the pandemic, there is still the aftershock to navigate. As with a hurricane, while the wind has stopped blowing, the effects on the people in its path will continue to manifest for a long time. As leaders, we still need to be vigilant. We cannot underestimate the stress and trauma we still need to address. The well-being of our employees and our entire company will depend on how successfully we do this.

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