

Mental health in the workplace

In any given year, about 20 to 25 per cent of the Canadian workforce will suffer from some form of mental illness, according to the Toronto-based Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.

That means, in a typical workplace, one in four workers will struggle with mental health issues, most commonly in the form of depression or anxiety.

It's a huge problem that presents a huge opportunity for HR to take the lead and ensure sustainable performance. After all, there can be no sustainable performance without organizational health. Conversely, there can be no organizational health without the mental health of employees at all levels throughout the organization.

Organizational health has two aspects: the actual health of the organization and the mental health of individuals within it. The organization must provide the conditions for success for all to perform to the best of their capabilities and to support employees with mental illness who are thereby unable to perform at their best. On the flip side, employees must provide the organization and colleagues with the highest standard of performance, which includes focusing on their own development, resilience and well-being.

A three pronged strategy on the part of the HR function is imperative. First, it is important to have early detection and an opportunity for treatment. Depression and anxiety are effectively treated and healed in 85 per cent of cases where treatment is sought. Second, HR needs to determine, at an organizational level, the root cause of the mental distress. This is particularly the case if it becomes evident that a number of people in a particular department or business unit are experiencing mental health issues. And third, HR should focus on prevention and stress management, which creates resilience in their employee base. This in turn creates organizational resilience and the sustainability of organizational perfor-

GUEST COMMENTARY

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mance.

It is critical for HR to provide education and internal communication aimed at building awareness among managers to help them recognize and act on the signs of depression in employees. Providing a referral service where employees can speak in confidence is important if the manager suspects an employee may need mental health support.

Warning signs

Early detection is critical and some of the signs to watch out for in individuals include:

- decreased productivity or change in the quality of work;
- poor judgment or indecisiveness;
- frequent absences or tardiness;
- difficulty in working with others;
- constant tiredness or low energy;
- frequent headaches or backaches;
- withdrawal from social contact;
- increased consumption of tobacco, caffeine or alcohol; and
- unusual displays of emotion, such as irritability.

Signs of group stress include:

- frequent disputes;
- increased staff turnover;
- increased complaints; and
- an increase in the number of accidents.

10 key sources of workplace stress

In some cases it may be evident that the organizational culture or the conditions in a particular department are toxic and are contributing to workplace stress. Those who report a consistent level of stress in their lives are twice as likely to become depressed. In these situations, it is important to determine the root cause of this stress. There are 10 key

sources of workplace stress:

- a lack of control over day-to-day tasks;
- office politics;
- lack of communication;
- inconsistent or unreliable performance reviews;
- lack of appreciation, perceived or real, on a day-to-day basis;
- career ambiguity and conflicts between work-life obligations;
- unclear company direction or lack of leadership at the top;
- unclear job expectations;
- random interruptions; and
- too much to do at once.

As the final part of the three-pronged strategy, organizations can use corporate mindfulness programs to be proactive in creating resilience in employees at all levels. The programs are essentially stress management programs that can include relaxation and meditation. Creating resilience in employees, which helps prevent high stress or burnout, also leads to organizational resilience. It involves helping employees to respond calmly and appropriately in any situation.

The prize of organizational sustainability and performance is dependant on the dual responsibility of the organization and the individual. Those organizations that are best able to create healthy and resilient environments, and that support the mental health of employees, position themselves for competitive advantage, those that don't, position themselves for demise. The HR function is uniquely positioned to take a leadership role and positively affect the mental health and resilience of the overall organization.

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