

Reducing Stress in The Workplace Through Supportive Leadership

There is no mistaken these are unprecedented times when it comes to stress and uncertainty in the nation. Stress involves feeling like you don't have the means/resources to tackle all of life's demands. It seems like some days many people are just barely making it through their day. In EAP, we hear the "barely hanging on" stories every day and see it on the faces of those we serve. Managers continually ask us what to do about their stressed out workers. They schedule trainings and groups on how to cope with stress and build resiliency, hoping to address the problem. While these are excellent ideas, we are hearing repeatedly that the number one work stressor is not the actual workload. Employees more often report that stressor(s) in the workplace include: not feeling supported; a toxic work environment; and poor communication and uncertainty. This doesn't mean the workload should not be re-assessed sometimes but we are also hearing from employers that the workload is often not something that can be changed. So, what is in our control that might lead to reduced employee stress? Here are a few tips to consider:

- **Grief Leadership.** Understand that most of your employees are in a period of grieving at the present time. Simply acknowledging their pain and suffering can be powerful and lets them know you understand. Communicating your own struggles with them will also help develop a sense of unity and humanity in the workplace. An Employee Assistance Program is great way to establish a built-in support system for all employees within an organization. Grief leaders say things like, "How can I best support you right now."
- **Communication Leadership.** Employees are often left to fill in unspoken blanks, making assumptions of what work silence or limited communication means. Continually keep employees abreast on upcoming changes to policies and procedures and if you have uncertainties let them know that as well. Asking for feedback lets your employees know you value their opinions. Most importantly, listen without defensiveness and with an open, solution-focused mind. Sometimes employees just need a chance to share what they are thinking and express

their concerns. An effective leader doesn't shame or blame when someone makes a mistake and is willing to accept their own fault at times. Communication leaders say things like, "Help me understand how we might do this better."

- **Courageous Leadership.** Remember you are leading by example at all times whether you are intending to or not. When you ask employees to abide by a policy that you yourself do not follow, you quickly lose the power to lead. Don't ask employees to do things you are not willing to do yourself. Work alongside them at times. Show humanity by admitting when you made a mistake or when you are uncertain. If you promote health and wellness activities, like encouraging the use of an EAP, make sure you are doing those things yourself. Know that there is no place for ego in the workplace. Courageous leaders say things like, "I'm feeling the stress too. Let's find a way to get through this together."
- **Gratitude Leadership.** Find ways to express your gratitude often. A simple thank-you goes a long way in the form of verbal acknowledgement, a hand written note, or an email. Acknowledge the extra work and/or hours employees are contributing and the sacrifices they are making. Take advantage of company down periods to reward them with things like a luncheon/food truck, voucher to leave early one day, or an added break period for a health and wellness activity (i.e. 15 min walk, quiet reading, meditation, etc.). Gratitude leaders say things like, "I know this has been a difficult few months but I want you to know how much I have appreciated your hard work during this time."

These are just a few of many low cost, highly effective solutions that demonstrate company values such as gratitude, health and wellness, and togetherness. It doesn't take much to influence motivation in others and positively influence an entire work culture. The simple take away is do more of what works and less of what doesn't to reduce stress in the workplace.

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