Investing in your team's mental health

Perhaps the greatest threat to employee morale and productivity is poor mental health. When employees feel overworked, underappreciated, passed over for career opportunities or bullied, they will disengage. They can also become stressed, anxious and depressed. That is when absenteeism and disability leaves increase, customer service deteriorates and productivity plummets.



One in five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime; the other four are indirectly affected through a family member, friend or colleague. So it is very likely you already have, or will have, employees who are either suffering from common mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, or panic disorders themselves, or are concerned about a loved one who is.

It is vital that managers, and the organizations they work for, invest in their employees' mental health. This does not have to cost great sums of money or consume a great deal of your time. Fostering good mental health among your team members can be as straightforward as:

- **Creating a healthy work environment.** Do not tolerate malicious gossip, bullying, self-serving actions, negativity, aggressiveness, or any other destructive behaviors. These create toxic workplaces that make everyone miserable. Take fast action to resolve conflicts and disputes so they do not escalate.

- **Monitoring workloads.** While most people enjoy being busy and challenged, they do not like to be constantly overwhelmed with work or unreasonable deadlines. This can cause stress, errors, absenteeism, burnout and can contribute to physical and mental health problems such as high blood pressure and depression. Make sure team members are not drowning in work or frustrated with hard-to-meet deadlines.

- **Promoting work life balance.** While every manager wants enthusiastic, dedicated and hardworking team members who are happy to work long hours if it benefits the company, the truth is that regularly spending 16 hours a day at the office is a quick route to physical and mental exhaustion. Be sure to encourage people to take breaks, go to lunch and leave at a reasonable time. Everyone needs time to switch off and re-energize, including hard-working managers!

- **Communicating with your team.** The only way to effectively monitor workloads, identify emerging professional and personal issues and offer constructive guidance is to have regular team and individual meetings. Staying connected to each and every person on your team also sends the message that you are invested in both their professional career and personal well-being.

- **Including employees in decision-making and problem-solving.** Having some control over issues that directly affect them will reduce stress and increase engagement and morale. This can include face-to-face or group meetings, surveys, and forums.

- **Understanding mental illnesses.** The more you know about mental illness, the more able you are to detect their early warning signs. While your job is not to diagnose or counsel, you can listen, be understanding, and direct employees to the company's Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) or other resources for professional help. If an employee has been diagnosed with depression, anxiety or any other mental disorder, be sure your team sees you treat it like any other illness.

- **Being a role model.** Model the behaviour you want to see in your team. Treat people with kindness and respect, try to be fair and equitable, communicate openly and be quick to eliminate negative behaviours.

Mental health issues are a growing concern for organizations. It is important to focus on prevention and to deal with any mental illness early – just as maintaining good physical health is promoted in the workplace.

Both managers and employees need to take the time to learn about mental health, eliminate the stigma that often surrounds it and, together, develop workplace strategies that support healthy work environments.