

ARE YOUR EMPLOYEES SUFFERING IN SILENCE?

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The Sound of Silence – Simon & Garfunkel:

“Fools,” said I. “You do not know Silence, like a cancer, grows”.

I was raised with a belief system that guided how I showed up at work. It was a simple approach; regardless of what was going on in your life – physically, mentally, or emotionally – you get up for work and put a smile on your face. It still rings clear in my ear, my mother and father sharing one of their many beliefs on what it means to be a good employee: “keep yourself to yourself”. It did not matter that your arm could be hanging off or that you were having a personal mental health crisis, the best approach was to act positive and pretend that everything was okay.

What I Thought Was Normal

That approach served me well for a long time – or so I thought. I never missed work, tried to be positive, and never shared the ups and downs of my life with colleagues. It also shaped my leadership style as “keep yourself to yourself” rolled around my subconscious forming judgment on my team, leaders, and colleagues. I tried hard to be caring and sympathetic; however, I did not understand why employees would want to share their intimate life circumstances at work and would secretly think “why are they emoting all over the place?”. I thought it would be better for everyone if they kept these personal matters to themselves. But what I later came to realize was that these thoughts about others were stemming from my own deep fear of “stigma” and being branded as a wounded employee.

When Life Teaches You a Lesson

Life likes to teach you lessons and mine came in the form of three significant incidents in as many years. First, both my parents became ill within a year of each other and my husband and I were the sole care providers.

Second, I experienced a fall at an airport that hurt my rotator cuff and took over 18 months to fully heal. Third, and certainly, the one with the most impact on my mental health, was after cancelling three vacations my husband and I finally got away and eight days in we were drugged and robbed. The impact on my life was burnout, stress, and panic attacks. I knew that my approach to my personal and work life had to change. I finally sought help from a professional and the result was that I started to come out of the “keep yourself to yourself” closet and share my story by writing and speaking about my circumstances. I was truly astonished that so many colleagues in the workplace were like me – suffering in silence with no real support from employers and living with the constant fear of damaging our careers. When I speak about the topic of mental health, most managers and HR professionals will refer to the great programs they have in place for employees. In response, I now ask the following: With so many great programs in place, why is mental health costing the Canadian economy \$50+ billion and rising every year? Why are depression drugs #5 on the 2019 Telus Health drug trends? And why have more than 20% of individuals left roles in the past for mental health reasons (by the way, this number is 50% for millennials and 75% for Gen Z)? While it is great to have programs in place there is a clear trend and a gap that needs to be addressed.

When Personal and Professional Lives Collide

When personal and professional lives collide as they have during the pandemic, the issue is only going to continue to get worse. Imagine if 20% of your employees stopped performing or left your organization due to stress or burnout? How would that impact your organization? How would you manage the workflow? Would the employees left behind be under so much stress that they too would suffer from; presenteeism, anxiety, or burnout? Mental health is not something you can throw a program at and hope that employees dial the 1-800 number. One size fits all programs are not enough to support so many diverse and unique employees and their personal mental health situations. As we enter a new age of leadership, we need to confront the mental health reality head-on and start to have honest conversations between leadership and employees. We all have a role to play in supporting mental health – the organization, the managers, and the employee. This means that managers need to have conversations with employees on an individual basis. I am always concerned when I ask a manager to tell me about the personal circumstances of employees during COVID, or anytime for that matter, and they have no clue if the person is at home by themselves, with school-age children or an ageing parent(s). How can we create cultures of trust, empathy, and productivity if we don't know our employees? It's time to rethink our approach to mental health in the workplace. We need to go beyond the basics and equip managers and leaders with the techniques and tools to recognize when someone is suffering, offer unbiased support, and guide their teams with compassion and clarity. When employees suffer in silence it has an impact on performance, morale, the company brand – the bottom line is: it is time to have the conversation.

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