

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS SUPPORT THEIR EMPLOYEES' PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH?

We all want to be our best to do our best work, and it's no surprise that healthier employees perform better. In the competitive and often stressful world we live in, we also all need to make our physical and mental wellbeing a priority. To be our best is not only about being our best physically, it's about being and mentally and spiritually fit.

What does this look like as our working environments are rapidly changing?

Working hours have become longer and our brains are now consuming and deciphering more information than ever before. The world of work is moving faster and evolving away from the traditional 9 to 5 office life. This is positive as more opportunities for what work is and what it looks like are presenting themselves, but that doesn't mean that all of these changes aren't taking a toll on our physical and mental health.

In a typical year 31 million working days were lost and over half, 15.7m, were due to mental health problems (stress, depression or anxiety). In 2000, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz laid out their case for the connection between the benefits of physical exercise and its link to professional performance in their article, *The Making of a Corporate Athlete*.

In the nearly 20 years since that article was published, I think we can all agree that our lives have got even busier! Exercise has had to fit around our other commitments, and technology has helped our fitness goals become more achievable. Exercise classes are being offered both in person and in virtual formats, and shorter class times make offerings even more flexible. Fitness chatter is also commonplace in the workplace - it's acceptable to talk about the type of exercise you are doing, any injuries you have encountered, and advice about which is the best gym to join near the office is openly offered.

All of this suggests that workplace leadership has seen the value and positive benefits when it comes to supporting employees' physical health. But when it comes to our mental health, this is still evolving. Unlike a physical injury, mental health illnesses such as depression or anxiety are not always as visible and can go undetected, especially at work. There is still a stigma about mental health and how having mental health struggles can be seen. During times like Mental Health Awareness Week, it's a natural opportunity for us to start, or continue, the conversation about mental health in the workplace and it's an opportunity to encourage us into action.

We want to be our best selves and do our best work, and we all have good and bad days down to our physical and mental health. As leaders, how can we help our people to be their best selves?

Be Open. Create an environment where being open about your mental and physical health is ok and 'normal'. Lead from the top. Have your CEO/senior leadership talk about their mental health and their experiences. This will kick start awareness and natural conversations within your organisation.

Make health (physical and mental) a priority alongside delivery of projects and development. Encourage teams to take breaks for their physical and mental recuperation, e.g. encourage your team members to take their lunch break and get away from their desk! Keep in mind, we are all different and enjoy different things. Some of us enjoy competitive team sports whilst others prefer more meditative activities such as yoga. This is the same for mental recuperation: some see the benefits of full on meditation, others will go for a walk. It's quite commonplace for organisations to encourage employees to take part in charity related walks and/or run to encourage camaraderie and fitness outside of work.

Train managers. Teach them to support their team and spot the signs of poor or declining mental health so they feel equipped and confident with how they can broach the subject and help. A lot of mental health problems go unnoticed or unaddressed as managers aren't sure what to do, or don't feel it's their place. Offer easily accessible seminars. Be aware there are different 'extremes' of mental health and that generations talk about mental health in different ways. Baby boomers have not grown up with mental health awareness and therefore don't have the same experience of openly talking about their health whereas younger generations can be more open to saying how they feel. Saying, 'I don't feel on top of my game today,' could be a fact and requires no intervention, the individual may be merely sharing.

Provide Mental Health support. We are all different and therefore we need to provide options for employees to give them the right support. This may be an employee assistance line, a mental health ambassadors group, employee clubs (running, knitting, book) and networks led by employees who want to build these communities. Equally important is making these accessible to all and letting people know they exist through communication.

Use Meetings to Check In. Begin team meetings and 121s by asking your employees how they are feeling, physically and mentally. Ask if there is anything you can do to help them be their best self. That may result in saying nothing, but as you build trust they may start to open up. Start your team meetings with a traffic light system. Green, feeling good, yellow, ok, red not great today. Don't analyse why, just say it. This will remind your teams we are human and whilst we are good at what we do, sometimes we are not firing on all cylinders. The more you do this, the more trust and openness will build within the group and I guarantee output will be stronger, as team members react to each other's cues.

Health Check. We have been doing a health check on the P&L for years, as part of quarterly performance reviews. Why don't we do a regular health check on our people at the same time. It's important to catch early signs of symptoms and conditions and be proactive. As we collect more feedback (engagement surveys, pulse surveys) and develop insights on our people, look at this data with a lens of how healthy the organisation is. Look for trends and red flags and get under the bonnet of what is going on in your organisation and act.

There is not one overall organisational approach to support employees being their best. It's about recognising individual needs and providing a mixture of support and making these initiatives known. To continue the conversation, I would be interested to hear what you have found has worked well and not so well. Let's share our experiences. I look forward to hearing from you.