EgonZehnder

Mental health and psychological safety are crucial for team success

Early lessons from the pandemic era

By Joyce Gesing, Elke Hofmann and Dirk Mundorf

Over the past few years, mental illness has finally lost its stigma. Today, as the threat of repercussions has receded, we are more likely to reach out for help when our mental health is suffering, whether due to depression or burnout. At the same time, more and more of us are taking preventive measures that are beneficial to our mental health. CHROs confirm that corporate HR departments are also increasingly recognizing and discussing these topics, as well as addressing them more proactively.

According to a number of CHROs, the pandemic has reinforced these trends, in part because it has highlighted the vulnerability of the human psyche. HR managers report that working from home has negatively impacted the wellbeing of many employees, especially that of extroverts who thrive on human interaction. Depending on their personal situation, many of them are experiencing a sense of deep loneliness, feeling not only physically but also emotionally distanced from others. This indicates that the pandemic is gradually morphing into a long-term crisis where the only constants are uncertainty and incessant change. Dealing with this requires a great deal of resilience, both on a personal and on an organizational level. CHROs report that many employees are worried about losing their jobs, in part

because the interpretive paradigms based on our habitual social norms no longer apply. In a British study conducted in late March, 40 percent of respondents affirmed that they were suffering from pronounced anxiety. In the USA, the likelihood that an adult would be diagnosed with a mental illness was eight times higher in April 2020 than just two years earlier. In many industries and countries, this alarming situation remains unchanged. This level of constant stress is detrimental to both senior management and employees.

The role of corporate culture

Corporations like Google have long identified mental health and psychological safety as key factors for improving team productivity. Senior managers who recognize and aim to reinforce these two drivers of success in their teams need to create the right conditions for a culture of psychological safety. This includes, among other things, fostering a culture of communication and conversation, ensuring economic security, and being open to different opinions and viewpoints. Companies must strive to create an environment and a culture where people can "be themselves". An environment that supports psychological safety not only promotes the psychological wellbeing of employees but also, according to Amy Edmondson at Harvard Business School, creates an atmosphere that enhances creativity and innovation while simultaneously opening up space for learning. Many companies have already recognized this. However, according to HR leaders in our network, many are still struggling to implement appropriate measures for providing the necessary support: "This requires more psychological training than my team and I currently have – HR staff of the future will need to be much better equipped to deal with this," states one of the CHROs we interviewed:

Personal framework

It is crucial that this environment should become an integral part of a company's culture, accompanied and/or reinforced by changes at both personal and organizational levels. While providing fresh fruit, setting up ping-pong tables in a meeting room, or setting up nap pods and sit-to-stand desks all make sense in this context, this is really just a preliminary step. Setting limits on working hours, allowing for technology breaks, offering mindfulness classes as well as supporting employee initiatives can also have a potentially beneficial long-term impact on

employees' mental health. HR professionals who also wish to strengthen team culture need to provide every employee with the necessary space to communicate in a way that transcends their job and the workplace. Regular personal check-ins, both in one-on-one conversations and in a team context, can help – this creates a sense of connection and openness. Managers can serve as important role models here, but partnered learning with multiple team members or a "study buddy" system can also serve as useful ways to support one another and promote a sense of connectedness within a team or even across functions and regions. This is not merely about empowerment, but also about self-efficacy and personal interaction. Most of us find this type of bilateral learning much more enjoyable than browsing online forums or watching instructional videos on our own. Even things like team workouts or creating shared Spotify playlists can help bridge the physical distance to some degree while strengthening team cohesion.

Organizational framework

Attempting to combat heightened stress levels, a sense of meaninglessness or feelings of social isolation with yoga or meditation classes alone will, at best, only provide short-term benefits. Instead, a balanced blend of solutions is needed, both on a personal and an organizational level. On a personal level, providing support for the individual's particular work mode is helpful, as is going back to the basic elements of wellbeing: sufficient sleep, proper breathing, quality nutrition and exercise as well as positive social interaction are just a few that come to mind. And finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that we are all facing our own unique challenges, be it in the realm of health, children or family. "We need to avoid making assumptions and start asking questions instead," suggests one CHRO.

On an organizational level, it may be beneficial to scrutinize the delineations between departments and responsibilities. An organizational psychologist confirms that an individual employee's sense of security is disproportionately impacted by their immediate environment, their manager and their coworkers. Especially in companies with top-down hierarchies and a highly siloed structure, a very small number of individuals shape the environment and the way people interact, both of which are factors with a significant impact on mental health. Decentralized, heterogeneous organizations, on the other hand, expand each individual's social network and provide a larger "safe haven". In such an organization, employees are

more likely to have the opportunity to shape their own environment, and to seek out and create the framework conditions that benefit and support them, reports the CHRO of a company that relies increasingly on an agile organizational structure. However, in order not to lose your bearings in a decentralized organization, you need a compass. As one CHRO put it: "We quickly adopted a new standard where our clients and our employees are the only compass."

Apart from the structure of an organization, its purpose – i.e. its mission – represents another key to employee wellbeing. Once you understand the impact of your organization, your team and your own actions, you are naturally more motivated to get up in the morning. Identifying and communicating this purpose is a key task of corporate management. Defining common goals and consistently celebrating (interim) successes ensures regular, motivating moments of success and happiness at both the individual and the team level.

Naturally, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the easiest context in which to address one's own health. Nonetheless, the pandemic provides us with a unique opportunity to address health-related issues even more thoroughly and with an even greater sense of corporate responsibility. Since we have already noticed a decline in the stigmatization of mental illnesses in society as a whole, and since the pandemic has highlighted the depth and breadth of the issue, this is an excellent time for HR management to come up with an appropriate response.

Birgit Oßendorf-Will, Group HR Director at Ströer Group, has this to say about lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis:

"We learned to make decisions quickly, communicate clearly and be open about the fact that we were all feeling our way forward – while also providing much-needed direction in this time of uncertainty and fear. That was of the utmost importance."

Ulrich Bensel, Chief Human Resources Officer at Deutsche Hospitality, shares these insights from his organization:

"It became clear how essential it is to facilitate lifelong learning for every employee. This is something we need to make time for, even when we're not caught up in a crisis like the current one. It forms the basis for developing new solutions hand in hand with our employees – to optimize existing processes and even develop new products."

Anabel Fall, Group Head of People Innovation and Transformation at Zurich Insurance, has this to say about the team dynamics of virtual collaboration:

"Building virtual and blended teams was easier than we had anticipated, since we were already in a good position and everyone perceived themselves as being an important member of the team. We built additional trust by simply dialing in from home and giving others more of a window into our personal lives."

This article is part of our "What next, now that everything's changed? HR and New Work" series, which reports core insights from our regular Zoom calls with HR leaders.

Synthesis

For more information, contact:

Joyce Gesing
Düsseldorf
joyce.gesing@egonzehnder.com

Elke Hofmann
Munich
elke.hofmann@egonzehnder.com

Dirk Mundorf
Munich
dirk.mundorf@egonzehnder.com

About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. We know what great leaders can do and are passionate about delivering the best solutions for our clients.

Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

For more information visit www.egonzehnder.com and follow us on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram.