Challenging the Stigma of Mental Health

Mental health awareness is recognised each year during May in the United States and other countries around the world. Organisations team together to bring awareness and support to individuals facing mental health issues. It is estimated that more than 70 per cent of individuals globally do not receive mental health treatment for their illnesses. One of the root causes that prevent people from seeking help is the stigma associated with having a mental illness.

The need to break down stigmas associated with mental health has become more important than ever before. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more employees and organisations have had to adapt to a new way of living, which has severely impacted employees' mental health. Some individuals at this very moment are facing isolation, lack of support, severe anxiety and depression that comes with the uncertainty of the future, but they are choosing not to seek support. It is estimated that there are 264 million people worldwide who suffer from depression. Statistics indicate that mental health stigmas prevent 40 per cent of people with anxiety or depression from seeking support.

Alan King, the CEO of Workplace Options, says there is a responsibility from the corporate level to address the stigma of mental health and to encourage individuals to seek support. 'No matter how resilient we feel we have been, no matter how resilient we feel everyone around us has been, the entire planet has been through trauma for a very long time, and there is no way that we aren't touched by what we've experienced', says King, 'whether that just comes in how our daily lives and daily routines have changed and what we decide to keep or don't keep from that, or the people we've lost or what we have missed in that period of time'.

There is no doubt that there has been psychological trauma experienced by many due to the challenges the world has faced in recent times, which makes breaking down misconceptions about mental illness of even greater importance. Individuals who experience mental health issues may find it challenging and may be hesitant to share their experiences due to some of the stereotypes that exist around the topic, which leads individuals to feel shame, guilt, fear or embarrassment. There are many dangerous misconceptions around mental illness that perpetuate stereotypes:

- Mental illness is not a real illness.
- Mental illness is just an excuse for inadequate behaviour.
- Individuals who experience mental illnesses are weak and can't handle stress.
- Individuals with mental illnesses are violent.

The reality for individuals who battle with mental health problems is far from what the misconceptions indicate. With so many deeply ingrained stereotypes, it becomes even more difficult for individuals who experience mental illness to speak up, as the fear of being judged and categorised by others brings even deeper feelings of insecurity. Employees may feel apprehensive about sharing their challenges and seeking support. Some individuals may be under immense pressure to express oneself in a positive light even when silently struggling with anxiety or depression. The implications of stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health in the workplace keeps people who need care away from getting the support they need, which leads to severe effects on an individual's overall wellbeing, productivity, level of engagement and satisfaction with their work. Overcoming the stigmas of mental health is beneficial for everyone, because when an individual attempts to confront their fears of being judged by others, it can be used as motivation and inspiration for others to come forward and seek support.

The first place to begin the conversation about mental health and breaking down stigmas starts with the leaders of an organisation. King says there is a responsibility from the corporate level to address the stigma of mental health in the workplace. 'I think it falls squarely on the shoulders of the leadership team in the sense that we have a fiscal responsibility to our organisations and to maintain the health and wellbeing of our business', says King. 'Health and wellbeing of your employees not only is a moral requirement, it's also an extraordinarily practical requirement that impacts the productivity of your workplace. It impacts the overall engagement that comes from your employees, and ultimately, it impacts whether an organisation's able to be successful in the long term or not.'

Effective leaders in an organisation are not afraid to come forward, discuss adversities they may be going through and check in with colleagues. King recounts a personal story he experienced in the workplace of a colleague who needed support but hid it from those he worked with closely. 'In a million years I would never have thought that there would be anything impacting this person, but their performance was starting to be impacted negatively. They were starting to react in different ways and become less reliable than they were before', says King. He went on to explain that simply asking the person about their family led to that individual opening up and discussing the challenges they were facing. 'It was really just by chance, when we were having coffee one day, when I just asked a question about "how's your family?" Just an innocuous question and everything came out, and what we were able to do is actually listen. In that moment I could listen, and then I could make a connection to support and services that could change things entirely around for this individual.'

Checking in with colleagues in the workplace in dire times is a reflection of the progress people are making in the battle against the stigma of mental health. In order to battle these stigmas, misconceptions and all other forms of discrimination associated with mental health, everyone must start the conversation around the issue.

'I think the first is you simply talk. You simply start the conversation', explains King. 'My experience in general is that all the things that people don't like to talk about are really the things that they should be talking about, and the one way to start the conversation is to recognise your responsibility to begin it. So, I think one of the ways, particularly with mental health, that leaders and others can diminish the stigma is by actually raising it and calling it out for what it is. Encourage others to share their stories, because it's the stories that we can connect with. The terms and words and the stereotypes of others are just that. The story is what we live and live every day, and that's what makes the most fundamental difference.'

It is in every organisation's vested interest to put more focus on ensuring employee wellbeing in the workplace. A physically and mentally healthy employee is less likely to take frequent leaves of absence and more likely to be engaged with their work, which adds great value to an organisation's bottom line. Breaking down stigma surrounding mental health starts with changing people's perceptions towards the illness, which can be done through the following actions:

- Educate yourself about the types of mental illnesses to better understand their impact on an individual.
- Examine your attitude and the attitude of those around you towards individuals battling mental illnesses.
- Speak out and challenge attitudes of stigmas and misconceptions around mental health.
- If you have overcome a mental illness, share your story to inspire others to come forward and express their challenges.

To achieve a healthy workforce, employees need to know that their leadership is committed to acknowledging wellbeing and breaking down the misconceptions about mental health. It all starts with effective leadership at the very top of management and trickles down to the whole team and organisation. Leaders must be an example and role models for positive change. Leaders can no longer ignore the role mental health has on productivity in the workplace. They must try to be mindful and empathetic towards employees and promote a positive and safe workplace by empowering others and encouraging colleagues to lift each other up. Checking in with colleagues could make all the difference between someone battling a mental illness in silence and getting the support they need.

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