How to manage the mental health of your people through COVID-19

Written by Karen Gately on May 7, 2020

The only real power we have is to choose our perspective and response to the circumstances we find ourselves in. Continue to express empathy for how people are naturally feeling but encourage also that they look beyond challenges to the things within their control, writes Karen Gately

You would quite literally need to be living on another planet right now to not realise that Covid-19 has fundamentally shifted the way in which the vast majority of people are living and working. Leaders face both a great opportunity and challenge in guiding their teams to be healthy, engaged, and performing through these times of unprecedented uncertainty and rapid change.

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From healthcare professionals and other essential service providers who are working daily with the very real threat Coronavirus poses to them and their families, to scores of people suddenly working from home in at times less than ideal settings, most of us find ourselves having to work differently and manage a great deal of complexity and stress. Then, of course, there are the people who have lost their jobs and face a foreseeable future of uncertainty and potential hardship.

For businesses to survive let alone thrive through these times it's going to take every member of the team doing their part. Teams of people who are able to think clearly, trust one another, take ownership and collaborate to find the solutions to the organisation's challenges, are those most likely to emerge from this experience stronger and more able to meet the needs of their customers in what will no doubt be a new world. The harsh reality is we are asking people to step up at a time when they are dealing with levels of stress many of them haven't faced before.

Among the most important steps any leader can take therefore is to prioritise mental health. It's safe to say the risk of mental illness impacting a lot of people across our community is very real. It's especially important for leaders to understand that extended periods of isolation can be particularly damaging to the strength of our spirit and mental wellbeing.

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Starting with their own and extending to the wellbeing of every member of the team, leaders are wise to take deliberate steps to ensure people feel has connected, supported and safe as possible. While fear is a natural human response to threat, allowing anxiety or depression to take hold is something as a community we can't afford to let happen.

Provide information and support resources to help people manage their mental health. Ask every leader in your business to step firmly into a coaching role and influence how people are thinking and feeling. The truth is none of us has the power to control either Covid-19 or the impacts being felt around the world. The only real power we have is to choose our perspective and response to the circumstances we find ourselves in. Continue to express empathy for how people are naturally feeling but encourage also that they look beyond challenges to the things within their control.

Be flexible and adapt. Understand the individual circumstances people face and adapt your expectations as needed. In other words, appreciate how people are now working and what that means for their capacity to focus and deliver. For example, while in some home environments it may be easy to find a quiet space to work, in others every member of the family is working at the kitchen table. Add young children or pets to the mix and it can be extremely difficult for some people to deliver when you need them to.

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Stay connected. We are fortunate to live in times when we have the technology to connect 'real time' and ensure every member of the team feels not only visible and supported but also accountable. Ensuring your team has a strong sense of purpose with a clear set of expectations is essential to optimising productivity. Trust that people will find their own ways in which to deliver but be clear on what the success of each week looks like.

Maintain routines. While it can undeniably be challenging to maintain a sense of 'business as usual' the more predictability and certainty we can build back into our lives the better. To the extent that it is possible, maintain the team routines you had in place before this crisis unfolded. So, for example if your team meeting is scheduled on Monday mornings stick to that time and move the meeting online. Even team social events are still possible. One organisation I work with has dubbed Friday night drinks 'quarantinies' and the team are more than happy to participate from home.