Key Steps to Overcome Mental Health Stigma at Work

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It is clear from recent studies that a change is needed in terms of how employers deal with mental health issues.

Research from Mind, the mental health charity, has found that stress and other mental health issues are the second biggest cause of sickness absences from work. This is unsurprising given that the Stevenson-Farmer Report, commissioned in 2017 by the government, found that 15% of people at work have symptoms of a mental health condition. It also found that 300,000 people with mental health problems lose their jobs

each year.

A factor contributing to these concerning statistics is the extent to which mental health problems are still seen as taboo. Some employers already recognise this – over 600 companies have signed the Time to Change pledge, committing them to ending the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Speaking up about mental health concerns is hard

Whilst this is a positive step, it is clear that many employees still do not feel comfortable discussing their mental health concerns at work. In fact, reports suggest that only 6.2% of employees in the UK would confide in their employer.

There are good reasons why employers would want to change these trends. Staff who are healthy (both mentally and physically) perform better, are more productive and engaged, and take fewer sick days. Not only that, but employers owe a duty of care to their workforce to protect them from harm caused by work-related stress.

What can employers to do make discussing mental health less of a taboo?

Fostering an open culture surrounding mental health is key. A company's employees need to feel able to raise any concerns they have without fear of repercussions or judgment and be reassured that they will be taken seriously.

Step 1 – create a culture of openness and awareness

An important first step in creating this culture is to open up a dialogue about mental health and let staff know that it is important to the company's values. Even just having it on the radar is a good start, but there are plenty of firms yet to do it. An analysis of all FTSE 100 firms' annual reports showed that two out of three of them made no mention at all of mental

health issues in their annual reports.

Step 2 – implement a mental health support structure

Once a company has raised awareness, there are some more tangible things it should do. First is to have in place appropriate policies for supporting those who experience mental health difficulties at work, so that there is a standardised system of empathetic support at all levels of the business, which also maintains confidentiality.

Step 3 – mental health training at all levels

Managers should be trained on recognising and dealing with mental health issues in the workplace by specialists. Not only will this help supervisors to spot the signs that any of their reports are having problems, but it will also give them the tools and the confidence to broach the subject with them. Not knowing what to say for fear of making things worse is commonplace and overcoming it can make a big difference to the wellbeing of the workforce.

With that aim in mind, the Bank Workers Charity in partnership with Mind has initiated a mental health training programme for managers in the UK's biggest banks, paving the way for others to follow. Similarly, Lloyds Banking Group provided e-learning on the subject to over 28,000 staff in 2017.

When it comes to dealing with particular individuals suffering with their mental health at work, managers should be empathetic, tactful and approachable. Regular catch-ups are helpful, as is discussing practical steps which can be taken to make the situation easier for that member of staff.

Gone is the time where must people suffer with mental health conditions in silence –employers should reflect on their attitudes towards mental health and make positive changes to bring the stigma to an end.

Our next mental health article will focus on our experience of ‘mental health first aid’ training.

BDBF is a law firm based at Bank in the City of London specialising in employment law. If you would like to discuss any issues relating to the content of this article, please contact us.

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