

Leader Guide: Talking about Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace



Audience
Managers

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to help managers apply REAL communication (using Respect, Empathy, Accountability and Learning) to talk about mental wellbeing in the workplace.

Why REAL Communication Matters

The world—and workplace—have experienced significant upheaval over the past few years, and these changes can bring stress, anxiety and burnout. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that 76% of U.S. workers surveyed reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition.

So, how can you as a leader help destigmatize mental health and improve your employee experience? It starts with REAL communication.

Familiarize Yourself First

Educate yourself on the subject before starting any conversation about mental wellbeing. Familiarize yourself with common mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and learn about the signs and symptoms of these conditions. This will help you better understand and support your team members who may be struggling.

When you're prepared, use REAL communication:

Respect: "I welcome your individuality. I will listen to your ideas and value your perspective."

- Let your team members know you care about their mental health just as much as their physical health.
- Acknowledge the impact the past few years have had on many people's physical, mental, financial and social wellbeing.
- Create a safe and non-judgmental space for your employees to talk about their mental wellbeing. Encourage open communication and let your team know that you are there to support them. Be mindful of confidentiality and assure your employees that their privacy will be respected.
- Encourage and support an atmosphere in which your team feels safe to be their authentic selves, share feedback, and empowered to ask for what they need.

Empathy: "I support your wellbeing. I will recognize your challenges and care about your life."

- Foster connection by intentionally checking in with each of your employees on a regular basis.
- Allow team members to talk about their feelings, and acknowledge and accept them.
- Listen with compassion and understanding, without judgment and with empathy.
- Keep an eye on workloads and stress levels within your team to help prevent burnout. Encourage work-life balance and offer support in managing stressors in the workplace.
- Promote self-care. Encourage employees to take time for themselves, whether that is a mid-day self-care break or taking a mental health day.

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Accountability: “I champion your success. I will give you clear expectations and share honest feedback.”

- Lead by example. As a leader, it is important to prioritize your own mental wellbeing. Share your own experiences with mental health if you feel comfortable, and demonstrate self-care practices such as setting boundaries, taking breaks and seeking support when needed. Your behavior sets the tone for how mental wellbeing is perceived and addressed within your team and the broader organization.
- Ask how you can help, if there are any resources your employees need that you can connect them with. If you don't know how to help, reach out to your HR team.

Learning: “I encourage your growth. I will maximize your strengths and support your aspirations.”

- Ask if they feel they are facing any barriers or need help identifying priorities or accomplishing tasks.
- Ask what they need to feel they can do their jobs effectively.
- Ensure employees are aware of the support available to them through their benefits plan, such as employee assistance programs, counseling services, and mental health resources in the community.
- Encourage employees to seek help when needed and provide support in accessing these resources.
- Offer trainings and workshops to educate your team on how to manage stress and build resilience.

Talking about mental wellbeing isn't a “one and done” situation. Continue to apply ongoing REAL communication regarding your employees' wellbeing. Check in with your team members regularly to see how they are doing. Ask open-ended questions about their wellbeing and actively listen to their responses. Be compassionate and empathetic, and offer support and guidance if needed. Encourage your employees to prioritize their mental health and seek help when necessary.

Key Resources to Have Available for Your Team

- You. As their leader, be there to listen, answer questions to the best of your ability, talk through concerns, workload, work-life balance, etc.
- Employee Assistance Program information—details on EAP resources, including contact information.
- Mental health resources and treatment options available through the employer-provided medical benefits.
- Free and confidential [mental health screenings](#) and resources through Mental Health America.
- Call or text 988 for immediate support with a mental health crisis.