



PERFORMANCE POT

A leader's role in driving workplace change that doesn't stigmatise mental health in the workplace

Many people are aware of the statistics around how common mental health conditions are, that around [1 in every 4 people](#) will experience some kind of mental health condition in their lifetime. Yet for some reason, within the workplace these statistics are forgotten. As if everyone who crosses the threshold into their workplace leaves all the difficulties of their homelife at the door. Mental health stigma within the workplace remains a persistent issue with damaging consequences to those affected but also the wider company.

What is workplace mental health stigma

Stigma is negatively held beliefs and attitudes towards a minority of people. In relation to mental health within a work environment these are the negative views towards people who experienced changes to their mental health. This could be not giving someone a promotion because they have disclosed a mental health issue or treating them differently to other staff. Another example of stigma would be not listening when employees are saying they are finding it difficult to cope, even if other staff with similar workloads manage. When considering workplace culture, one that is built around negative or stigmatising perceptions can view mental illness as a show of personal weakness or a reflection you can't do your job. . In turn systems that should be there to support and see you as a person treat you as if your mental health issues define all of who you are.



In comparison the treatment and support of physical health conditions are viewed very differently with leaders not shying away from discussing what barriers the illness poses and what support can be put in place to enable the person to still carry out their role. Many people reading this would argue that just doesn't happen in their workplace. Yet, year after year statistics around workplace mental health tell another story. Mental Health First Aid highlights around 9% of employees have reported that [following disclosing a mental health issue to their manager](#), they have been dismissed, demoted or disciplined. The [Priory Group](#) conducted its own survey on workplace mental health stigma and found that over 70% of people would worry about telling their managers if they had a mental health issue. Despite many companies declaring employee mental health a priority, less seem keen to put their money where their mouths are, so to speak with. In the 2018 Cinga Wellbeing survey, the UK landed [5th worst for unmanageable workplace stress](#) which resulted in the country being ranked poorly for mental wellbeing. In the UK it is suggested that over [12% of sickness days](#) taken are due to a mental health issue and [90% of those people who take time off](#) because of their mental health give employers another reason for their absence.

What this tells us is there is still much more to do within the workplace to not only improve wellbeing but to also shift workplace cultures and attitude so people feel they can speak out about their mental health and ask for support if and when they need it.

Why do leaders need to be part of change?

Leaders have the biggest impact on company cultures and have a [responsibility to demonstrate and reinforce](#) the behaviours that reflect the values and vision of the company. These values should also align with a manager's, senior or CEO's own values and priorities, when they don't you are more likely to create an unhealthy culture with unhappy employees who see through disingenuous leaders who can easily talk the talk but can rarely do the walk.

Change is inevitable, every business small or large will go through periods of growth either due to success or necessity to keep up with the times.



Many leadership structures are based on archaic management styles that have been shown to be ineffective in promoting a healthy working environment. In comparison, Norway is a country that not only finds itself consistently ranked in the Top 5 happiest countries in the annual [World Happiness Report](#) but promotes the Scandinavian Leadership Model. The model places emphasis on leaders ensuring their employees feel valued and equal is suggested by [BI Norwegian Business School](#) to be one of the reasons why Norway is one of the most productive countries in the world.

Being behind the wheel of change can be daunting for those in a management position, but coming at it from a position that places wellbeing at the heart of decisions, communication and expectations can ensure that driving for change doesn't stigmatise or jeopardise the mental health of employees.

How to push for change that doesn't stigmatise mental health

1. Communicate

Effective communication is key to making your employees not only feel supported during times of change but also valued and heard. You may be in a higher position but that doesn't mean you care any more about the company than those doing the groundwork.

How to apply it

How to apply it:

- Be clear and honest with the direction of change the company is heading in
- Offer employee space either collectively or 1:1 where they can discuss their thoughts and feelings about the proposed changes.
- Keep people up to date with the status of change and next steps. If you work in a larger company this might not be possible face to face each time there is an update. Use emails, video messages or good old fashioned notices in the staff room to keep everyone in the loop.



2. See the person not the job title

Even when change is a good thing, some people may be hesitant to adopt new ways of working or attitudes. Touch base with people during supervisions to ask how they are coping with the changes within the work environment. If people feel seen they will be more likely to let you know what support they need.

How to apply it:

- Ask how people feel about the changes and if there is anything that can be done to support them (i.e additional training, extra supervisions etc)
- Learn about reasonable adjustments and how you can apply them within the workplace
- Attend some training on discussing wellbeing in supervision

3. Be the change you want to see and set the standard

Leaders need to set an example, if you're expecting employees to change how they work, hoping to improve workplace culture or adjust attitudes within your team it has to start with you. Be aware of your own unconscious bias and how it can be interpreted by your employees as a stigmatised view. The eye roll when someone has phoned in sick again, the clear frustration at someone not hitting a deadline when you expected them too and the judgement when someone declines to work overtime. These are all common examples that can happen on a regular basis within workplaces that will tear down any attempts at positive change.



How to apply it:

- Get out there and show people how to do it. If you want to change workplace culture, get out on the shop floor and demonstrate the behaviours you want to see. Change can also come from communication, if you want to have conversations with colleagues or your staff about mental health think about utilising a [mental health first aid course](#) to give you the skills and confidence you need.
- If you provide training for staff relating to the change, attend alongside other employees. Ask people what they learnt from the training and what elements of it they would want to be seen implemented within the company.
- Ask for feedback from staff who ask for additional support. The best way to find out if you're effectively supporting people experiencing mental health difficulties is to ask them. Ask if they felt supported enough, if they encountered any discrimination from anyone and if there was anything that could have been done differently.

