Leadership and mental health: a guide to practicing what you preach

Many CEO's, managers or team leaders now recognise the importance of looking after their teams wellbeing and improving workplace culture. Yet, leaders themselves often wind up not applying the same principles to themselves. In a study carried out by BUPA, over 1500 senior managers or above across 10 companies based in the UK, China, USA and Mexico were asked about barriers they faced regarding mental health in leadership. They found that 64% had experienced a mental health condition, 58% felt they could no longer talk about their mental health in a position of leadership due to fears it would reflect on their ability to do their job. The most common mental health conditions experienced were depression, anxiety and stress with work pressure acknowledged as a contributing factor.

What happens if we don't address leadership wellbeing?

Positive change in the workplace has to start at the top otherwise it won't make meaningful and long lasting change to those working on the shop floor. Teams look to managers and above to lead by example, seeing managers burning out, working unrealistic hours or not being able to get support when they need it won't influence change.

At best it might leave people questioning the authenticity of new drives to improve wellbeing culture, at worst it will put people off wanting to develop their careers within the business. If companies don't openly show they value **all** their staff including those in management and senior positions it can negatively impact retention of staff who have potential to rise up the ranks.

How do leaders practice what they preach?

There is a difference between signing up to improve wellbeing and workplace culture and actually doing it in practice. We all know some of the steps we should be taking to improve our overall wellbeing at work. However this takes some time, commitment and attention to find out what works for you. Resilience is a key tool for managers to be able to draw from, both for their own wellbeing and to be able to support the wellbeing of their teams. The [Resilient Managers](#) course provides *"leaders of all experiences with practical strategies, tactics and tools to confidently lead wellbeing conversations and nurture a working environment that supports the whole team."*

We've also put together this short guide with some useful tips on how you can start to role model positive wellbeing practices.

1. Prioritise your own self care

That well known quote *'you can't look after others if you can't look after yourself'* is extremely relevant for leaders. If you don't prioritise your own mental health and self care, how do you expect your staff to follow by example? Not only will it improve your mood but looking after your wellbeing has also being shown to be linked to improved focus and productivity at work. If your company has signed up for flexible working hours, early/late finishes or has provided company discounts on gyms and swimming pools use them to support your own self care.

Improving the work life balance and making things that keep us happy and motivated non-negotiable can have considerable effects on your overall feelings of happiness, improve mental resilience and ability to cope with high stress situations.

How to apply it

Make a list of the things you do that make you happy (eg. spending time with family, going to the gym, painting, listening to music). Next, put them in a priority list of what's most important to you. Use this list to build your own self care routine

Example: I am going to go to the gym 3 morning a week before work. I will get home by 6pm so I can put my daughter to bed. I will spend my morning before work with my husband rather than checking my emails

Put boundaries in with you non-negotiables. Spending time with your family or doing an activity you enjoy is not going to be as enjoyable if you're taking work calls or checking emails. Put in boundaries around work time and home time. If you don't find it acceptable for your family and friends to be calling you whenever they want to while you're at work then why is it acceptable for work to call you when you're at home?

2. Start conversations with other managers

If BUPA found that over two-third of those in senior positions experience a mental health condition the likelihood is other managers within your company have too. Change begins with conversations that address the elephant in the room. The elephant here being a need for leadership mental health to be improved and better supported. This can't happen without people first speaking up and sharing their own experiences and barriers. Companies need to come away from the idea that senior teams saying they are struggling is a sign of weakness or incompetency. Instead focus on building cultures where managers feel they can reach out to others or seniors to talk about their mental health and feel that can get support if they ever need it.

How to apply it:
Put 'wellbeing' on the agenda. People might not want to talk about any struggles their going through in front of everyone but mentioning wellbeing in senior meetings shows your company is conscious about it. Use these meetings to remind people they can reach out, signpost to places they can get support, or use it to get speakers in to talk about workplace wellbeing.

Look out for others, pay attention to what your colleagues are saying and doing. Are they working all hours to meet deadlines, does their temperment seem different to usual, has their focus and productivity being affected? Ask them to meet for a coffee away from the office and ask how they're really doing. You often won't be able to fix what's causing the stress, but knowing someone is there to listen can go a long way.

3. Develop and implement

Attention to wellbeing in leadership can lead to some interesting changes and improvements within companies, many businesses who have focused in on the wellbeing of their senior teams have found work satisfaction rates increase dramatically. The trap many companies fall into is they pay lip service to wellbeing but actually outside of a few posters or website statements nothing changes.

In a report on workplace wellbeing [ineffective management contributed to their employees mental health problems](#) citing managers were dismissive of their issues because other employees could cope with the work demand. For change to happen you need to first develop a better understanding of the rationale behind why wellbeing needs to be a priority. Find effective ways to implement better practices to support your own and others wellbeing and ensure they are carried out. Mental Health First Aid training for managers and leaders delivers evidence backed information on the whys and hows of improving leadership wellbeing.

How to apply it:

- Search online for [Performance Pot](#) to find bespoke training for both individuals leaders and management groups.
- Have a agreement prior to training that you will return with some strategies to improve wellbeing amongst your senior teams. Having this prior agreement gives you some accountability and also lessens the chance of push back.
- If you're not sure where to start, try building on your resilience. [Resilience in leadership](#) is a great tool to manage and support the wellbeing of both yourself and your team.