



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Keeping It Together

A conference for employers in Minneapolis last week focused on how to recognize depression in the workplace. One of the conference speakers, a retired business executive who lost two of his four children to depression and suicide, now volunteers his time helping employers recognize depressed employees and refer them for help. These are welcome and needed efforts; the U.S. Department of Labor reported a twenty-five per-cent increase in workplace suicides over the prior year, and last year 585 Minnesotans alone took their own lives; Mental Health America estimates that left untreated depression costs over \$43.7 billion in absenteeism costs alone. If we add job stress and anxiety to mental health-related employer costs, even if we conservatively halve the American Institute of Stress' estimate, we can add another \$150 billion. And that's not to mention the significant toll that depression, stress and anxiety take on quality of life for workers and their families.

While efforts to improve recognition and treatment of mental health issues in the workplace are important, we need to pay more attention to minimizing them in the first place. Here are some recommendations:

- Pay attention to job fit. One unfortunate job fit issue I encounter is excellent engineers, doctors, educators and other professionals pressured into management roles (in some cases pressuring themselves) when they and their organizations would be better off had they remained on a technical track.
- Model respect and don't tolerate disrespect. Detractors from mental health here run the gamut from basic unfairness, discrimination or harassment to ignoring others or yelling at them.
- Be accessible and communicate. Much anxiety these days is driven by uncertainty about organizational health or direction and employment prospects. Respectful two-way communication includes availability to just listen, frequent communication and updates, telling the truth (even if it's not pretty or we just don't know) and empathy.
- Recognition and rewards: Merely recognizing others' contributions and simple sincere thank-yous can go far. Reducing dissonance between what organizations claim is important (stated values and objectives, for example) and how people are actually rewarded will also lower anxiety and increase engagement.
- Work / life balance: We are learning from research and progressive organizations like General Mills, Ceridian, Carlson Companies, Capella University and Best Buy in Minnesota that giving

employees more control over their schedules and the flexibility to handle personal responsibilities raises productivity, reduces stress and increases engagement. We must all learn to distinguish between finding ourselves in our work, putting ourselves into our work and losing ourselves in our work.

- Good work: I like Howard Gardner's conception of "good work:"* work that is *excellent* in quality, *ethical* and socially responsible, and *engaging*. Work that does not meet our own quality standards, conflicts with personal values or contributes little real value wears us down. As David Whyte puts it in Crossing The Unknown Sea - Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity,** often we are fatigued not on account of overwork, but a lack of whole-heartedness. Lack of whole-heartedness manifests itself when we accept behavior or values on the job that we would find unacceptable in our personal lives, justifying it by thinking that "it's just business." It manifests itself when we cannot identify with a product or service that we contribute to, or believe deep down that it may even be harmful, rationalizing that "it's just a living," or "if we didn't provide it someone else would." It manifests itself when on Sunday night or Monday morning we are sick at heart about the prospect of another day in the office, of work that does not exercise our best gifts and talents, or that doesn't resonate with any kind of purpose that has meaning for us.

I know that mental health is largely driven by brain chemistry, genetics and family history, and is in many cases independent of leadership and organization culture factors. After ten years inside corporations and over twenty-five as a consultant, however, I know that poor leadership and unhealthy cultures can literally drive people over the edge. I wonder how much of the conservatively estimated \$200 billion in mental health-related employer expenses and quality of life would be preserved if we made just a ten or twenty per-cent improvement in these facets of organizational culture and leadership practices?

- *What are some steps that you will take or help your organization take to improve engagement and people's mental outlook?*
- *What are some steps that you will take to improve your own work / life balance and mental outlook?*

In making a living today, many no longer leave room for life.

Joseph Sizoo, D. D.

There can be no happiness if the things we believe in are different than the things we do.

Freya Stark

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* Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikzentmihaly and William Damon. Good Work - When Excellence and Ethics Meet; Basic Books, New York, NY. 2001

** Whyte, David. Crossing The Unknown Sea - Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity; Riverhead Books, New York, NY. 2001

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