Creating An Anxiety Free Workplace

A Simple Blueprint For A Happier Work Experience

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Anxiety can present itself in many places in our lives, and the workplace is no exception. 83% of US workers suffer from work-related stress, with 25% saying their job is the number one stressor in their lives. About one million Americans miss work each day because of stress. 76% of US workers report that workplace stress affects their personal relationships according to The American Institute of Stress. Additional statistics include:

- 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful
- 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives
- 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago
- 29% of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work
- 26% of workers said they were "often or very often burned out or stressed by their work
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems
- 80% of workers feel stress on the job, nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress and 42% say their coworkers need such help
- 25% have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress, 10% are concerned about an individual at work they fear could become violent
- 14% of respondents had felt like striking a coworker in the past year, but didn't
- 9% are aware of an assault or violent act in their workplace and 18% had experienced some sort of threat or verbal intimidation in the past year

The Cost of Stress

Beside the toll on health, stress also costs businesses and the economy trillions in absenteeism, low productivity, and healthcare costs. Though stress in the workplace is inevitable, providing stress management tools will mitigate the effects of stress, and will lower healthcare and other stress-related costs to the business in the long run.

- Depression and anxiety cost the global economy approximately $1 trillion in lost productivity.
- An estimated 1 million workers are absent every day because of stress.
- Job stress is estimated to cost the US industry more than $300 billion in losses due to absenteeism, diminished productivity, and accidents.
- Over five hours of office work hours are lost weekly to employees thinking about their stressors.
- Work-related stress costs $190 billion in annual healthcare costs in the US.

As the nation moves through the effects of the pandemic, we are seeing extensive increases in anxiety, depression, and anger. People are having a difficult time securing and maintaining employment. The ambiguity associated employment procedures, locations, expectations, and safety have replaced work environments that were typically last ambiguous, more stable, and more defined with regard to workplace responsibilities and standard operating procedures. It may take some time to redefine the role of business, and the employee. In the interim, it is imperative that management and employee assistance personnel become trained to be more proactive regarding the needs of the employees, and in the presentation of services to help them readjust to an undefined workplace environment

The Efficient Workplace Blueprint

It is imperative that ownership, management, and employee service personnel understand how important it is to reduce workplace ambiguity, to help employees define their workplace responsibilities, and address the emotional issues which may affect their productivity, emotional well-being, and happiness. It is so important for management to understand what has happened to their employees, and also to understand what they are thinking and feeling as a result of the changes we have experienced in the nation. Like it or not, these changes have found their way into the workplace, and those employers who are willing to assist their employees as they reassimilate themselves into the workplace environment, will see happier employees, and increases in productivity.

The Important Steps

    1. **Lip service doesn't work. Authenticity does.**

All too often, supervisors, management personnel, and employee assistance staff attempt to quickly move past employee concerns and complaints, without gaining an understanding of what the employee is thinking and feeling. The rule here is if you say you are going to be there for your employees, then follow through. In order to communicate efficiently with employees, you must be willing to listen to them, and understand exactly what their concerns are. They must walk away from you with a feeling that their concerns have been validated, and that you are going to either do something on the spot, or very shortly to help them address those concerns. Even if there's nothing you can do about their concerns, listening to them, validating them, and explaining what may or may not happen is invaluable. If an employee feels as though they are intellectually and emotionally invisible, and that there opinions do not matter, their performance at work will reflect those feelings.

Regardless of how management looks at the changes in today's employees, you are going to spend time with them. If you are not helping them address their needs, that time you spend will be as a disciplinary action, a suspension, or a dismissal. And while the process develops, expect undesirable behaviors, tardiness, absences, problems with supervisors and or other employees, and loss in company revenue based upon the reduction in productivity and absenteeism. The old form of negative reinforcement has no place in today's workplace. Never ever disrespect an employee, and never ever talk down to them.

Since you are going to spend time with today's employee, it makes sense to be proactive, understand their needs, and at least show them that you are willing to attempt to work with them to address their concerns. The key is that employees need to believe you are doing your best to treat them with respect, listen to what they are saying, and make every attempt, within reason, to address the situation. Never lie to them, misdirect them, or placate them. Make no mistake about it, they are intelligent enough to see through this. If you work with them, they will work with you.

    2. **Invest in your human resources personnel**

The individuals you have designated to be the frontline service providers for your employees need resources, training, and enough time to spend with the employees. Unfortunately, businesses and corporations tend to be lean when it comes to their employee

assistance programs. Human resources personnel cannot efficiently address the needs of the employees unless there are enough staff to do so, they have the necessary space to ensure confidentiality and personability, and are provided with the programs and training necessary to keep up with an ever-changing workplace employee.

The process starts with talking to your human resource providers, and ask them whether they feel their department is large enough, and has adequate resources to service the number of employees who work for you. Time is an essential factor in employee relations, and these people should have enough time to adequately understand an individual's problems, and to help them formulate some form of treatment plan to address them. Very rarely do we hear employee resource personnel tell us that they're able to keep up with the changes in today's workplace, and they too are working under ambiguous and undefined conditions. Training to help them address employee needs is essential and needs to be ongoing. Human resources personnel must understand each and every job associated with the people that are trying to help, and what it takes for employees to properly function in those positions. The more we know about the employee, the more we can help them. <u>Give your human resources personnel what they need to succeed. Provide them with everything they need to efficiently address the needs of the employees in a timely fashion. By the way, your human resource personnel are people too, and they have needs. Healthy human service providers are essential, so pay attention to their needs.</u>

3. It's always about the people

Too many businesses make the mistake of hiring outside concerns who have no intimate understanding of the employees they are being hired to assist. So many of them come in with elaborate programs with reported track records that attest to their success. Unfortunately, these people don't spend enough time in your facilities, and they do not have a day-to-day working knowledge regarding what is happening there. Regardless of how successful they say their programs are, programs to help employees are only as strong as the people who deliver them. The successful delivery of the program always depends on the capabilities of the staff who are going to deliver it. Instead of investing large amounts of money in firms who are never going to become intimately involved in your business, spend your money turning your employee service personnel into your own personal in-house employee service experts.

If you look closely at the programs you are bringing in your business, you will find that they have a shelf life of about two years. At that time, the people delivering them will either find ways to stop using them, or they will simply have no option as a result of what's occurring in their day-to-day responsibilities. This is why it's so important to provide routine training and educational programs to your Human Services staff, and to supervisory staff. Supervisors are often the hands-on people working with individuals in their day-to-day job functions. Giving them good people skills, ways to understand what employees are experiencing problems, and knowing what to do to help them obtain the help they need is essential in the day-to-day workplace. So, the rule is to train your in-house staff who have more intimate day-to-day contact with employees, help them refresh their skills routinely, and provide them with the necessary resources to efficiently help employees. If you do, you will reap the benefits of efficient in-house employee workplace programming.

4. One person at a time is always the way

When it comes to human interactions, nothing feels better than to have someone's undivided attention, and know that what you are saying is important. Listening is the fundamental skill in efficient communication. If an employee feels this is though what they are saying is important, and that they're not being grouped into some quick fix, let's get this out of the way of communication process, they will feel as though they are important to the company, and they will respond by making the company important to them. In the past three years, we have seen a serious decline in basic human respect. We have seen verbal assaults that seem to have become a way of life, and people firmly believe that they will be victimized in most social situations. The workplace is a social situation.

Letting people know that they are important, that it is safe to talk to you, that you are listening, and taking what they say seriously, sets the stage for a communicative process that can be beneficial to everyone involved. When an employee approaches you, treat them with dignity and respect, and listen to what they have to say. In order to help facilitate this level of communication, everyone in the organization should attend trainings which enhance communication, and listening skills. That starts at the very top of the company, and includes every individual who works there. Make sure that what is being taught in these trainings is something that carries over into the day-to-day employee setting.

5. Be proactive

What seems like a tremendous amount of work is really all about understanding that the workplace environment, and the people who are employed there have taken on different roles, and have very specific and very different needs. As I mentioned earlier, you will be putting in the time, either to repair damage that has occurred, or to create a workplace that communicates well, and takes care of everyone employed there. There is far less work to do in the proactive stages of employee programming than there is to do when the crises develop. Damage control consumes far more resources, and does far more damage in the long run, so do be willing to be proactive, and provide the necessary personnel, resources, and programming to address the ever-changing needs in today's more complicated workplace.

Today's workplace, and the individuals who are employed there have experienced a significant change in the last three years. There is no return to the old normal, and today's workplace will continue to evolve. Those employers and management personnel who understand this, and have made a decision to become prosocial in their attempts to address their business strategies, and the employees they hire to carry out the various functions associated with their business plan, will experience a happier and more productive workplace. Be someone who is willing to invest the time and resources to build a solid business plan, with trained employee service personnel to carry out that plan. It's as the old saying goes. You can pay me now, or you can pay a whole lot later.

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