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The Manager's Toolkit: Practical Strategies For Supporting Employee Mental Health

Helping your team thrive through empathy, awareness, and connection

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Highlights:

- ✓ Open conversations—not just policies—create psychologically safe teams where mental health is prioritized.
- ✓ Managers who recognize distress and respond with empathy improve retention, morale, and trust.
- ✓ Supporting mental health starts with basic tools: check-ins, boundaries, and human connection.



In recent years, mental health has rightly taken center stage in workplace conversations. With growing awareness around stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression, organizations are realizing that employee well-being is more than just a wellness program—it's a business imperative. And at the heart of this movement are managers, who act as the critical link between leadership and employees. The way managers engage with their teams can significantly impact workplace morale, stress levels, and ultimately, employee retention.

Supporting mental health isn't about being a therapist; it's about fostering a culture where people feel psychologically safe, respected, and empowered. Managers may not always feel equipped to tackle this sensitive area, but with the right mindset and a few practical strategies, they can make a meaningful difference.

One of the most powerful tools in a manager's toolkit is communication. Not just formal updates or feedback on performance, but real, human conversations and constructive feedback. Managers should strive to create an environment where employees feel comfortable speaking about their challenges without fear of judgment or repercussions. A simple check-in—"How are you really doing?"—can go a long way. When employees sense that their manager genuinely cares, it fosters trust and opens the door for honest dialogue.

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But open communication alone is not enough. Managers must also learn to recognize signs of distress. While employees won't always vocalize what they're going through, behavioral changes can be telling. Increased absenteeism, declining productivity, disengagement, irritability, or sudden withdrawal may signal mental health struggles. Rather than confronting these signs with disciplinary action or frustration, an empathetic and supportive conversation can help uncover deeper issues and guide the employee toward help.

It's also essential that managers are well-informed about the resources available. Whether it's an employee assistance program (EAP), access to a counselor, or mental health workshops, employees should know what's on offer—and feel encouraged to use these resources without stigma. Managers should not only be familiar with these tools themselves but also actively promote them as part of a healthy workplace culture.

A common contributor to poor mental health at work is the lack of balance between personal and professional life. Deadlines, back-to-back meetings, and "always-on" expectations can quickly spiral into burnout. Managers must lead by example here, respecting boundaries, encouraging time off, and discouraging after-hours communication. Allowing flexibility in schedules, especially in today's hybrid or remote work models, also gives employees the autonomy to manage their own energy and responsibilities better.

One area that is often overlooked is training for managers themselves. Not all leaders instinctively know how to handle conversations around mental health, and that's okay. Organizations should provide basic training in mental health literacy, equipping managers with skills to navigate sensitive topics, respond to mental health disclosures appropriately, and support team members in distress. When leaders are confident and compassionate, it creates a ripple effect through the organization.

Creating a mentally healthy workplace is also about building an inclusive and respectful culture. Employees should feel that they belong, regardless of their background, personality, or challenges. Managers can foster this by actively listening to team feedback, celebrating diverse perspectives, and promoting fairness in workloads and opportunities. Recognizing contributions and providing positive reinforcement also boosts morale and engagement, which are closely tied to mental health.

Finally, managers should encourage a culture of continuous improvement when it comes to mental well-being. This means regularly evaluating team dynamics, checking in on workloads, soliciting feedback, and adjusting approaches as needed. Just like any other aspect of performance or strategy, supporting mental health requires ongoing attention and adaptability.

Supporting employee mental health is not about grand gestures or expensive programs. It's about being human, being present, and creating a social connection at the workplace where people feel seen, supported, and safe. Managers have the unique power to shape this environment, and with the right toolkit, they can lead teams that are not only more resilient but also more productive and engaged. When mental well-being becomes part of the managerial mindset, the entire organization stands to benefit.

Author Bio



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