

WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The message, the messenger, and the delivery

The first step to improving employee mental health is getting leaders to talk about it: “What leaders say and do makes up to a **70% difference**,” in whether employees feel supported.

Although **68% percent** of employees believe that companies should support mental health, many are still largely uncomfortable talking about their mental health at work, according to a **Mind Share Partners’** survey. This is a big problem for businesses that want to retain top talent and boost productivity. The **CDC estimates** that employers lose between \$17 and \$44 billion each year in missed workdays due to common mental health issues like depression.

When building a workplace well-being program, communications can be just as critical as the resources offered. Consider the below communication strategies to help increase well-being program awareness, consideration, and utilization.

1 THE MESSAGE

Reduce stigma and encourage openness

Employees are often reluctant to talk about mental health concerns because of stigma, which can be **societal, self-directed, or institutional**. It prevents many from seeking mental health treatment for a variety of reasons—they feel ashamed and fear the disapproval of others, or maybe they’re concerned they may lose professional opportunities. Open, non-judgmental conversations can change perceptions about mental health. **HBR notes** that education, social connection, and peer support are the best methods for decreasing stigma.

Make the message inclusive

When having discussions, acknowledge that mental health can represent a range of experiences, from situational challenges to chronic illness.

Emphasizing one kind of experience over another can alienate those who have different backgrounds and attitudes around their issues. Some employees might recognize their mental illness as a disability, while others may be dealing with temporary stresses. To ensure no employee is left behind, reach out to employee resource group leaders for ideas and feedback.

Acknowledge the real world

Conversations should acknowledge how events outside the workplace, like Covid-19, are impacting employee well-being.

A **poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation** found that 45% of U.S. adults felt the pandemic was harming their mental health. Businesses need to make space for grief and uncertainty even as the vaccine rollout continues. The potential upside for mental health and culture initiatives is high. Deloitte found that businesses that pursue organization-wide culture and awareness initiatives around mental health can see a **6:1 ROI**.

Amplify the message

A global tech company aimed to normalize workplace mental health discussions by launching a new wellness program, including **Talkspace** counseling & therapy services as a resource. The initiative’s central message, “It’s okay not to be okay,” featured a series of training sessions about psychological safety and resiliency. The ongoing wellness campaign has inspired employees to take action. More than half of those who registered for Talkspace through this employer were first-time support seekers.

2 THE MESSENGER

Hand the mic to company leaders

Executives and managers shape how workers view their company and its commitment to mental health, making leaders the ideal messengers around this issue.

Have leadership

Along with sharing their own experiences, leaders should elevate employees from diverse backgrounds in discussions about mental health. Letting different employee groups—people of color, women, parents—share their unique experiences and mental health issues helps them feel seen and welcomed in the workplace.

Verizon media’s approach

As part of a campaign to reduce mental health stigma at work, Guru Gowrappan, CEO at Verizon Media, **shared** a video featuring Verizon employees from many different backgrounds talking about mental health.

Gowrappan also hosted a **training** with his executive team on how to create a culture of trust and transparency. **HBR reports** that after Gowrappan wrote about the training in a company-wide email, other managers followed his example and expressed their support for mental health to their teams. Employees noted that they felt like their leaders were advocates for the issue.

3 THE DELIVERY

Provide accessible mental health benefits

A low-quality mental health benefits package signals to employees that the company doesn’t actually value mental wellbeing. To shift this perception, your HR team should not only secure a robust benefits and healthcare package, but also frequently communicate the range of options available.

Care covered by insurance

In 2020, many major health plans expanded their behavioral health network to address rising mental health challenges connected to the COVID pandemic. Now, many of those options are here to stay. Virtual visits and messaging-based care can help employees start care sooner and provide ongoing support throughout the week or month.

Options beyond insurance

Since many workers opt out of insurance coverage or can’t find **available in-network options** through their employers, companies should also offer solutions that aren’t insurance-based. You might offer a wellness stipend or work with a third-party vendor, such as **Talkspace**, to offer counseling or virtual-based therapy.

Time-off policies

Your time-off policies are another important way to support employee mental health. Providing **mental health days** as part of your sick leave policy sends the message that mental health is just as important as physical health. Consider also offering unlimited sick leave policies to minimize **burnout**.



Remind team members that these mental health resources are available throughout the year as part of your **employee engagement** strategy. You can tie the message to events like **World Mental Health Day** and note it during times of heightened excitement and stress, such as orientation, year-end reviews, and promotional periods.

Want to learn about the mental health trends shaping today’s workplace?

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