



## A Lot To Be Stressed Out About: Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Psychological safety is a term we are hearing more and more of not only in our personal world but in the work environment. Coincidentally, as we look at this topic, May was Mental Health Awareness month and June is National Safety month, among the other initiatives we celebrate, and it is benefiting we review this topic of psychological safety in the workplace in the context of both of these initiatives.

### Psychological Safety

Employers should know that workplace safety—as governed by the Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—is outlined in the OSHA general duty clause that all employers are to “furnish to each of his employees’ employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees.” 29 U.S.C. § 654, 5(a)2

As a nation, survey results from the American Psychology Association (AMA) reveals there is much we are stressed out about. No surprise it ranges from personal finances, health, family matters to social injustices, politics, and the personal safety of ourselves and family members. Believe it or not, the majority of the stressors come from world and national events, not from high impact life events that we personally experience. To go along with these events creating stress, everyone has their unique way of maintaining composure during these events as well as a unique opinion on the circumstances surrounding these events. More and more people are not afraid of speaking their mind, some politely, others loudly, impolitely, and with violence.

The American Institute of Stress estimates that job stress costs U.S. industry \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, lower productivity, medical, legal and insurance costs. However, when a person has no ability to control life’s situations, a sense of powerlessness arises, which, according to the American Psychological Association, is a “universal cause of job stress.”

Anger and fear are no longer being bottled up and these emotions go everywhere with people, throughout the neighborhoods, stores, restaurants, our schools, and yes, into the workplace. Are we to feel physically and mentally safe with so much violence around us? In previous articles we have addressed how to establish policies and practices to respond to physical violence in the workplace. This article we are addressing the aspects of psychological safety in the workplace.



**Psychological Safety** is defined as a condition in which you “feel included, safety to learn, safety to contribute and safety to challenge the status quo.” In the workplace a cultural environment needs to exist in which employees are free to perform and express without “fear of embarrassment, being marginalized, or punished.”

As with all human capital initiatives, the strategic thread of psychological safety runs across all human resource programs. A major connection is within the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion practices. The workplace is changing and it's not just about hiring the right people to check that box that the organization has achieved an equal employment hiring practice.

Having an EEO policy is not enough. While we all should be treated as equal. Diversity and inclusion cultures additionally welcome and promote the uniqueness in each of us and provide the mechanism for a workplace where “all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization’s success.” Such a commitment would be like the following:

### **Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion**

The Company is committed to creating and maintaining a workplace in which all employees have an opportunity to participate and contribute to the success of the business and a revalued for their skills, experience, and unique perspectives. This commitment is embodied in company policy and the way we do business and is an important principle of sound business management.

While an organization through its management practices appears to treat all employees as equal, unconscious biases can alternatively provide a real or perceived sense of exclusion in our ability to treat each other non-discriminately. A policy alone cannot eliminate the unconscious biases that exist working against a culture that embodies a workplace where people want to work. How does a company promote and support diversity and inclusion in the workplace? Performance management is the equalizer.

Studies have shown that stress can lead to aggressive behavior. Employers see stress displayed by their employees in many behaviors: good performance deteriorates, increased absenteeism occurs, cooperation with team members erodes, and a once focused employee becomes distracted, potentially creating safety hazards. Supervisors and HR traditionally have dealt with these issues through performance improvement plans up to and including termination of employment. It is important today for employers to know their employees so that they can recognize or unearth the reason(s) behind poor performance if they want to have an ability to retain employees.

Employers—regardless of size or industry—should be aware of warning signs and how to coordinate with HR for taking appropriate action with the employee as well as safeguarding the workplace. Some of the more obvious signs of unhealthy stress levels include:

- Intimidating, belligerent, harassing, bullying, or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior;
- Numerous conflicts with supervisors and other employees;
- Statements indicating desperation (over family, financial, and other personal problems to the point of contemplating suicide);
- Drug/alcohol abuse;
- Extreme changes in behaviors.

Supervisor communication should occur daily with employees not just when a poor performance challenges arise. Employees management should include positive responses to the below questions:

**Is communication professional?**

- Professional doesn't mean that good-natured conversation cannot occur, but is the communication promoting an atmosphere of respect or is it demeaning and/or discriminatory?

**Is workplace bullying occurring?**

- 19% of Americans are bullied, another 19% witness it;
- 63% of Americans are aware of abusive conduct in the workplace;
- 60.3 million Americans are affected by it;
- 70% of perpetrators are men; 60% of targets are women;
- 61% of bullies are bosses.

**Is there bilateral communication where top management and employee are sharing information, ideas and feedback?**

**Is there a conflict resolution process in place that promotes employees having authority to resolve matters with each other and/or their supervisor and bring to the attention of HR when needed?**

**Does the company have a comprehensive employee assistance program (EAP)? Is the EAP used in the performance management process?**

While employees may be going through stressful situations, and employers should have compassion, there is also the reality that quality performance is still required. A supervisor referral to an EAP can include discussion with the EAP on the performance standards that need to be brought up to par. While the supervisor is not a party to the EAP/employee discussions, the supervisor can have check-ins to identify if workplace performance goals are being achieved.

Most important for an organization today, are supervisors, managers, and those in leadership positions, trained to pro-actively manage the organizational team? Employers cannot only rely on the tactical skills of the leaders to maintain positive employee engagement. Management needs to be trained on effective leadership of their team and how to manage that leadership within the culture of the particular company with an ultimate focus on attracting and retaining the right people in the right seats to drive forward the mission of the organization.



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