

Forbes

LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

U.S. Workers Give Employers A Failing Grade For Providing Mental Health Support

EDWARD SEGAL, SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR

The cause of an internal crisis at an organization can be as fundamental as a difference of expectations, opinions and priorities.

A case in point are the apparent differences between what companies and their workers think about issues related to mental health in the workplace. The failure to bridge those differences could create a corporate emergency that can include low staff morale and challenges retaining and recruiting employees.

One new survey showed there is a big gap between what employees think of the mental health support they receive from their companies compared to how well employers rate how they are doing in providing that support to workers. A second study examined the attitudes of business leaders toward mental health in the workplace and what they believe organizations can do to help.

Failing Grade From Employees

One study, the *2021 Employer Mental Health Report Card*, found that workers gave their companies a

failing grade — “F” — when it comes to workplace mental health and well-being support. By contrast, employers graded themselves a “C” average for the mental health support they offer to their workforce.

The research project was conducted by Lighthouse Research & Advisory for LifeSpeak, a mental health and well-being platform for employees and organizations. Two surveys were conducted, one targeting employers and the other targeting employees. Both were done online in early November 2021. The margin of error on each was 4%, with 99% confidence.

This is not the first study to show that companies are out of sync with their workers. Earlier this year I reported on a survey that showed many more employers than employees want to return to their offices.

‘A Big Gap’

“In the 10 years I’ve been doing research on employer priorities, this is the first time I’ve seen this big of a gap between the reality that workers and employers perceive,” said Ben Eubanks, chief research officer at

Lighthouse Research & Advisory.

“When analyzed in aggregate, the data from this research indicates that employers are trying to implement solutions to support mental health needs for the workforce, but the reality is these efforts aren’t being seen, felt, and received by many of the workers they are meant to support,” he observed.

‘What Shocked Us’

Michael Held, CEO and founder of LifeSpeak said, “What shocked us is how big the disparity is between the perception of employers and the perception of employees regarding the quality of mental health support within their organizations.

“Mental health has been a growing focus for employers — especially over the past couple of years — and our survey shows that many have made positive improvements. So, to still earn a 4.4 ranking on a ten-point scale shows that whatever they’re doing is missing the mark.

“For the most part, employers need to focus more on listening to their workforce and providing a variety of

options so they can provide mental health support that better aligns with workers' needs," Held recommended.

Disconnect

In another separate research project, digital consulting firm West Monroe's *A Survey on Mental Health in the Workplace* found there's a disconnect between what's currently being done and what would help most.

According to the report, "Business leaders say their workplaces are using a number of strategies and tactics to support mental health in the workplace – an average of five per company.

"But there's some disconnect between what organizations are doing, and what business leaders say would be most helpful. The top option for our survey respondents (extra time off/extra personal days)...ranked dead last in companies' current strategies."

The survey also found that:

- Only 7% of business leaders said they own or champion workplace mental health and wellness as part of their own role.
- 11% of business leaders said their companies are not addressing mental health at all.
- Only 31% of leaders said they're addressing it and already are planning to do more.
- 49% said they're addressing it but could do more.

The study included 151 business leaders with a manager or above their title and was taken between October 18 and November 2, 2021.

Advice For Business Leaders 'A Number Of Steps Employers Can Do'

Jason Hunziker, MD, is the division chief of adult psychiatry for the University of Utah's Huntsman Mental Health Institute. He said to further mental health awareness in the workplace, there are a number of steps employers can do, including:

- Training supervisors in the necessary skills to have conversations with employees about signs and symptoms of mental health, and connecting them to available mental health resources.
- Develop protocols to address a mental health crisis in the workplace.
- Participate in national mental health screening days for depression or other mental health conditions.
- Display and frequently share mental health resources and community crisis services with employees.
- Work with community mental health centers, university health systems, and community-based organizations to get access to experts that can provide education and information.

"Integrating these practices into the workplace may be a life-saving step for an employee struggling with a mental health crisis," Hunziker said. "Creating a culture that normalizes the idea of seeking help will encourage coworkers to help each other find support when they need it."

'Organizations Need A Twofold Approach'

Amy O'Neill is vice president and director of health and well-being strategy at Liberty Mutual Insurance. She said that, "Organizations need a twofold approach to mental health – access and acceptance – providing a wide range of benefits that address mental health and a culture that normalizes the conversation around mental health."

'A Variety Of Resources And Benefits'

"For example, at Liberty Mutual we offer a variety of resources and benefits that help employees overcome day-to-day stressors, such as free visits with mental health counselors through our Employee Assistance Program, free access to an online stress management program that offers tips and techniques for building resilience, as well as free access to a program that helps employees navigate their finances," she noted.

'Create A Culture Of Acceptance'

O'Neill suggested that, "To advance mental health awareness and create a culture of acceptance, we continue to adopt new resources and hold open conversations. This includes programming around the topic of mental health, such as internal webinars/panels that touch on its impact, leadership trainings that provide tools for managers to lead with empathy and have honest conversations with their employees, among many other initiatives."