

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

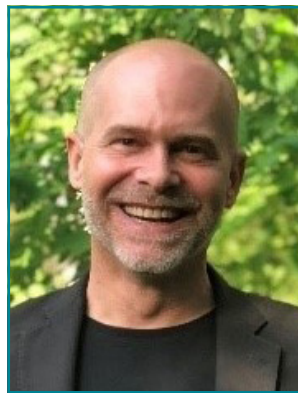
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Empathy: A Business Imperative

By Kathleen Greer and Bryan Kohl



Empathy is something organizations have been talking about for decades. As a result, some can truly characterize their culture as one grounded in empathy, while others, perhaps not as much. Suffice it to say, the pandemic has forced organizations to reflect on their workforces — to better understand their employees' myriad of needs, expectations and overall wellbeing.

As we continue to move through this pandemic, employees' behavioral health have become top-of-mind for many organizations.

There is no debating that these are incredibly challenging times. Leaders and managers alike have been forced to confront, not only within themselves, but across their teams and organizations, heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout — even with those who have never experienced these problems before.

Those who continue to navigate these conversations demonstrate the courage — empathy — needed across the workforce. Admittedly, these are not easy-to-have conversations, hence the need to have more of them. But in addition to having those conversations, there are other ways organizations can exhibit more empathy. As a business leader you must:

Assess your own mental health. As a leader, look inward for any hang-ups you might have such as outdated attitudes about mental health. Ask yourself how you're doing and what sorts of things you're doing to stay healthy. Recognize that everyone deals with stress in their own unique way and may need vastly different types of care to get back on track.

Don't just show concern, *BE* concerned. Show employees that you are concerned about them and want to know how you can help. A statement of this

continued on Page 2

FEATURED INSIDE

- ▶ There is No Vaccine for Bad Workplace Culture
- ▶ Mandatory Vaccines not a Good Idea: Study
- ▶ For the Younger Set: Must-Haves in a Mentor
- ▶ Sites Worth Checking Out!
- ▶ COVID Response Creates 'Perfect Storm'
- ▶ Distinguishing Bipolar from Depression
- ▶ Not Just SAD but also PAD
- ▶ Effective Conflict Resolvers ...

INSERTS

- ▶ *Brown Bagger*: Trust: An Emerging Crisis
- ▶ *Payroll Stuffers*
- ▶ *Lifestyle TIPS*®

type should be made at the beginning of every briefing and in every written communication. Make sure that managers are well trained in how to manage virtually and are aware of behaviors associated with anxiety, depression, and burnout. Don't underestimate what a quick five-minute check-in call can do to promote trust across your team.

How to be an Empathetic Leader

To please is a natural instinct. A team that likes their leader tends to push toward higher levels of productivity and commitment. It's a win-win, but how can it be accomplished?

HONESTY IS KEY. If the business leader wants honesty, he/she has to be ready to offer it first. Show the opposite and the leader shouldn't be surprised if he/she has to deal with dishonest team members. You get what you give.

LISTEN BEFORE SPEAKING. Listening is a skill that needs to be practiced often. The leader must focus with the intention of truly **listening** to employees and take notes because they may have the next creative idea. If they're taking the time to offer ideas, chances are they care about the business and its goals.

GET IN THE TRENCHES. A good business leader must be willing to do whatever needs to get done. Barking orders doesn't get anyone anywhere. The team needs to see that the leader is capable of doing their job if they can't. However, it's also important to know when to pull back, when things are going well and allow for normal activity to resume.

DELEGATE AND TRUST. That said, doing **everything** is counterproductive. The team needs to be shown how to handle additional responsibilities. This is crucial in discovering and developing new ways of generating revenue.

PRACTICE FAIRNESS. Never play favorites. Know employees well enough to recognize what motivates them and also what discourages them. Understand how to handle both ends of the spectrum. ■

Source: Angela Civitella, founder of Intinde and a certified business leadership coach. www.intinde.com

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Crush your biases. Be honest with yourself about any biases you have about mental health and substance use issues. It is likely that more than half of your employees are experiencing distress due to the pandemic and other personal issues. "Normalize" mental health issues by acknowledging them in every communication. De-stigmatizing exercises can be incredibly helpful, along with videos of individuals discussing how they're addressing their behavioral health challenges.

Provide the best. Be the best. Acknowledge that there are barriers to accessing mental health care and work to streamline that access for your employees. Provide easy access to mental health screenings and virtual and in-person counseling. Audit your benefits to make sure you have the best possible resources in place to assist people in need. More importantly, make sure that people know how to access those resources. Make sure that mental health is not discussed in a stigmatizing way.

continued on Page 3

Try out your own benefits to make sure they work. Many organizations are being approached by mental health point solutions that will simply connect people with an algorithm. Solutions that use algorithms to assist employees find services can be helpful, but empathy and personal touch are more important now than ever. Make sure managers are trained to recognize behavioral health problems.

Maximize your investment with your EAP. Have a critical conversation with your EAP about how they are delivering service and connecting with your workforce. Are there services offered through the EAP that aren't well promoted? Could you work with the EAP to make those services more visible? Would a



(Wellbeing) Employee Resource Group (ERG) help to clarify what services employees need?

Your EAP can serve as a hub for all-things behavioral health. If you are considering a new point solution, expect your EAP to partner with that provider. Your EAP should be referring to your other behavioral health benefits and services.

As you re-imagine EAP, make sure there is still a personal touch. Not all EAPs are created equal. Top-tier EAPs will provide immediate phone counseling with experienced clinicians to vet referrals before they are made and follow up to see how things are going. Don't settle for less if you want employees to feel supported and return to full functioning and productivity.

Don't make BH solely an HR issue. Review the EAP data as seriously as you would your financial data.

continued on Page 8

Editor's Notebook



While it's great to see that COVID vaccines are being distributed throughout the U.S. and world, 2021 remains a crucial year for many of us, including *Employee Assistance Report (EAR)*. We need more subscribers and timelier renewals from current subscribers to continue publishing this newsletter beyond this year.

If you enjoy reading the *EAR*, tell your colleagues about it! If they subscribe, you may even be eligible for a prize. If you're a subscriber, contact us ANYTIME regarding your status.

We had a lot of problems with our previous online payment portal, but we have been working on a new one to make subscribing and renewing easier – the status of which was not known as I wrote this note.

EAR has been looking into having subscribers receive one PDH or CEU for reading the cover story! We'll keep you posted. If you have other ideas what would make *EAR* a "must have" let us know. We love hearing from you!

Is empathy the new resilience? The latter has been a buzzword in the business world for some time, but empathy is catching up. "How organizations address their employees' behavioral health — a function of empathy — is no less important than how organizations address their financial health," state Kathy Greer and Bryan Kohl in this issue's cover story.

Speaking of trends, another one involves *trust*. Between big tech, big media, polarizing politics, and others, trust seems to be at an all-time low. This isn't good for anyone. It isn't good for mental health, and it surely isn't good for business. Check out this issue's *Brown Bagger and Lifestyle Tips* inserts to learn more.

We hope everyone is having a safe and healthy start to the spring, and hopefully a more normal year.

Mike Jacquart

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There is No Vaccine for Bad Workplace Culture

By Jason V. Barger

There is no magic pill, button or wand that you can wave that will quickly fix or treat the ails of a bad workplace culture. We live in an instant gratification world where people/employees/leaders want things to change for the better immediately. But when it comes to workplace culture there is no vaccine!

The best team cultures don't just magically happen, they are intentionally designed and led along the way. It's not reactionary, it's proactive. The following are four "musts" for leading a workplace culture through these tumultuous times of change:

1. Name It —Those in charge must identify what is and what isn't working within the workplace culture. The best teams have the ability to be honest with one another and name the very best of their culture and spot the areas that are troubling. Only after naming the current state of a culture is an organization able to move forward.

2. Define It —If organizational leaders can't describe the culture they are trying to create, they shouldn't be surprised when it doesn't exist. Language drives behavior. This is why the most successful and compelling teams and cultures have values language that is clearly defined and linked to action and behavior. They have a vision for the culture they want to create and clearly define the values they believe will guide them in that direction. Values become a compass for their journey not a poster on the wall.

3. Plan It — The word culture gets thrown around very loosely by many leaders and within some organizations and then only becomes talk. It becomes vague and the words do not line up with action. The best leaders and organizations realize they need a cultural strategy and plan of attack. Culture is not an "add on" to the work you do, it is everything. So, what's the plan?

4. Anchor It — Teams and organizations that lead significant culture change know they must anchor the values of their culture in everything they do. The vision they have for the future and the values that will guide

them there become a living and breathing element for the ways in which they hire, onboard, develop emerging leaders, evaluate performance, lead meetings and raise the bar on leadership throughout every level.

Summary

The best organizational leaders invest in their workplace cultures and realize the health of the organization is an ongoing process that never stops. A management consultation by the EAP can help lead them toward that goal. ■

Jason V. Barger is the globally celebrated author of Thermostat Cultures, ReMember and Step Back from the Baggage Claim as well as the host of The Thermostat podcast. Learn more about him at JasonVBarger.com.

EAR Needs to Hear from You!

Employee Assistance Report (EAR) has begun contacting readers regarding when their subscriptions are coming due. We recognize that everyone is busy these days, but renewal income is absolutely crucial for this newsletter, so after we contact you, **we ask you to kindly respond at your very earliest convenience.**

We are also looking for additional subscribers this year! While we realize some of this is "on us" in terms of marketing efforts, there is also nothing quite like word of mouth. So, if you enjoy reading the *EAR*, why not tell colleagues about it?! And if they subscribe, you may even be eligible for a prize.

With our new bimonthly schedule, mark June 3 on your calendar for the next newsletter, and be on the lookout for timely EAP blog posts between now and then at <https://www.writeitrightllc.com/blog>. Any questions, let me know!

In the meantime, we hope everyone is safe and healthy!

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Mandatory Vaccines not a Good Idea: Study

The results of a new study indicates that employers want to keep good relationships with their employees and so many are not requiring vaccination as a term of employment.

A study released by Littler Mendelson based on a survey of 1,800 employees, found that while 43% of employers are still talking about what to do, nearly half (48%) have already decided against a mandate. And the reason for this decision is that 67% are concerned about a mandate's impact on employee morale and company culture. The concern stems from the fact that 79% cited resistance from employees about requiring the vaccine.

"It's a telling sign of the unprecedented environment we're operating in that employers' top two concerns with requiring vaccination are not legal or liability issues, but rather focus on the personal perspective of employees grappling with an ongoing

global crisis and the potential impact on company culture," said Barry Hartstein, leader of Littler's COVID-19 Vaccination Working Group.

Indeed. To solve both safety and business issues, employers and employees have been working together in ways that might not have happened before the pandemic.

GE Appliances is a great example. In a strong demonstration of teamwork, 1,100 salaried employees worked the lines to replace workers who had to take care of health and family issues.

Boundaries were crossed and then transformed into heightened understanding and respect. As these groups of employees worked together the line between management and employees were blurred if not erased. The outcome was a single united culture. ■

Additional source: EHS Today.

Quick Ideas

For the Younger Set: Must-Haves in a Mentor

Someone who is respected. Choose someone who you believe does things the right way for the right reasons; someone who is widely admired for being honest and fair. Then study how they handle difficult situations, tough conversations, and setbacks.

Someone who is generous. Look for someone who enjoys sharing knowledge and is delighted to teach you some skills. You want a person willing to share their contacts and expertise.

Someone who is positive. These types of people tend to see opportunity everywhere, they attract other positive people, are usually good problem solvers, and get a lot done. When things get tough, they will "have your back" and help you find answers – crucial traits for a mentor. ■

Source: Joel Peterson, chairman of JetBlue Airways, professor at Stanford University, and LinkedIn influencer.

Web Watch @ Work

Sites Worth Checking Out!

CareConnect USA: Helplines

<https://careconnectusa.org/coronavirus-hotlines-usa/>

CareConnect USA, a publisher of free helplines since 2005, maintains a state-by-state list of coronavirus hotlines. In addition to hotlines, the site also includes about information about financial stress and disaster relief. The SAMHA Disaster Distress helpline is **800-985-5990**.

Johns Hopkins: Resource Center

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>

Johns Hopkins, experts in global public health, infectious disease, and emergency preparedness have been at the forefront of the international response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Dismantling Racism Works Web Workshop

www.dismantlingracism.org

This web-based workbook was originally designed to support the Dismantling Racism Works two-day basic workshop. The workbook is now offered as a resource to the entire community. ■

COVID Response Creates ‘Perfect Storm’

Lockdowns and social distancing may be key to stopping the spread of COVID-19, but they are having other, deadly, effects too, according to a University of Otago study.

Dr. Katerina Standish says the public health reaction to the pandemic negatively increases rates of domestic violence and suicidality.

Search terms were categorized into precarity, insecurity, despondency, helplessness, indicative male violence, and intentional male violence. They included searches such as “lost my job,” “I don’t have anywhere to go,” “I want to die,” “no one will help us,” “how to hit a woman so no one knows,” and “he will kill me.”

Results showed an “overwhelming upsurge” from all six categories from 31% to 106%.

Dr. Standish is calling for policy makers to put self-harm and domestic violence at the front of their minds. Her main message for the public is to be aware of those around you, keep connections in real life, and reach out to people who may need help – *such as those services provided by an EAP.*

“Lots of people are losing their income and sense of safety and the virus has exacerbated precarity and insecurity that existed before the pandemic. Suicides happen when people are alone, feel alone or like they don’t matter.

“We may lose some to the virus, but we must try to help one another survive the pandemic response too. Check on each other and keep checking on each other.” ■

Distinguishing Bipolar from Depression

Diagnosing bipolar disorder is not easy. It is a problem that has motivated researchers to look for measurable biological markers that might differ in depressed patients and patients in the depressive phase of bipolar disorder, perhaps facilitating more accurate diagnosis. Preliminary success has been reported in a study led by Mary L. Phillips, PhD, reports *Psychology Today*.

Phillips and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic traced clues from prior studies that pointed to potential differences in the way the brain prepares for and performs working-memory tasks in depressed individuals vs. those in the depressive phase of bipolar disorder.

Working memory is a system the brain uses to maintain, manipulate, and update information pertaining to

tasks immediately at hand. Damage to neural networks that are activated during working memory results in impairments in learning, reasoning, and decision making that are observed in certain people with mood disorders, including depression.

Each participant was scanned for both “easy” and “difficult” working memory tasks, and under conditions in which they were exposed to a range of emotional stimuli, from positive to neutral to negative.

Researchers said the results suggest that anticipatory brain activation that precedes performance on working memory tasks may be an important biological marker of major depression and bipolar disorder, indicating the possibility that targeting anticipatory processing could be a promising direction in developing future therapies for both conditions. ■

Not Just SAD but also PAD

By the time most of you read this, the spring equinox will have arrived, and longer days and more daylight means Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) will be more or less “over” for roughly 5 percent of Americans until next winter.

Or will it? As Martin Klein, a clinical psychologist in Connecticut put it, this year is more “*like Seasonal Affective Disorder on steroids. The people I treat this year are suffering from a syndrome I have coined Pandemic Affective Disorder (PAD).*”

Symptoms of SAD include overeating, sleeping too much, and a loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed. Many afflicted with PAD demonstrate the same symptoms as individuals suffering from SAD.

“Individuals with PAD are suffering from severe social isolation, anxiety associated with political unrest, financial insecurity including unemployment, and fear of getting ill,” Klein states. “Some may not be able to go in to work or school.”

Klein’s patients are far more the norm than the exception. “The Center For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that the level of depression amongst Americans since the outbreak of COVID-19 has gone up over 300 percent,” he adds.

Suggestions for countering PAD include:

- Develop a group of friends and family who you feel comfortable with, who have been socially distancing and have tested negative for the virus. Be creative with small outside gatherings, utilizing heat lamps, fire pits or blankets.
- Use technology to meet with friends and family on a regular basis via video conferencing.
- Avoid watching too much negative news on TV.
- Have more family movie nights. Or consider a family read-aloud.
- Go for walks or other forms of outside exercise.

- Play board games, cards, or other games to take your mind off troubles and even bring some much-needed laughter.
- If you live alone, try playing solitaire.

The sky is the limit, but the point is to try SOMETHING. ■

Additional sources: Connecticut Mirror, Epoch Times.

Quick Ideas

Effective Conflict Resolvers ...

❖ **Understand the individual’s needs.** Does the person need to vent? Brainstorm solutions? Be coached? Effective conflict resolvers understand what a person needs by asking questions: “*What are you hoping I will do?*” “*What do you see as my role in this matter?*”

❖ **Engage in collaborative listening.** Collaborative listening takes active listening one step further by supporting the work of the other person. The speaker’s job is to clearly express his or her thoughts, feelings, and goals. Effective conflict resolvers facilitate clarity, make the individual feel heard, and ask questions that probe for deeper understanding: “*When you said X, what did you mean?*” “*If Y happens, what is significant about that for you?*”

❖ **...Are good communicators.** They pick up on positive messages to spur progress. They paraphrase accurately so words aren’t distorted. They ask the listener if this is new information, and if it changes his/her stance.

❖ **...Are optimistic and resilient.** They agree to participate in a negotiation as an act of courage and hope. They inspire by being optimistic, resilient, and they don’t let arguments end prematurely – settling for anything just to bring them to a conclusion. ■

Source: Dina Beach Lynch, former ombudsman for Fleet Bank.

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Paid Time Off a Serious Issue

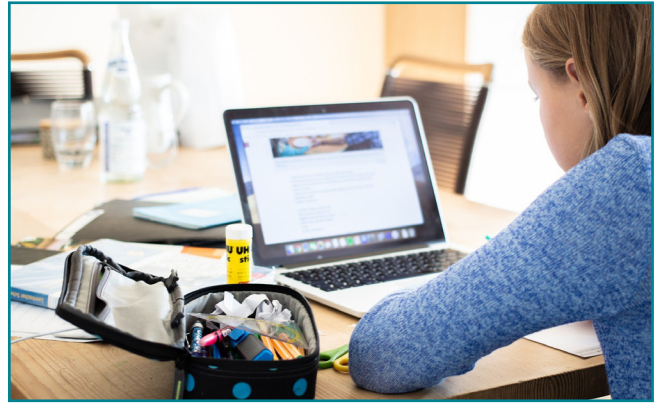
Since shelter-in-place orders went into effect, employers have been grappling with high PTO (paid time off) balances as employees let their vacation days expire. Ninety-two percent of employees cancelled, postponed, or avoided booking a trip due to the pandemic, according to an employer survey by IPX1031, a Chicago-based financial services company.

During COVID, employees are working longer hours and are struggling with mental health challenges like burnout that are impacting their productivity. These stretched-thin employees are costing employers upwards of \$125 billion in lost productivity and healthcare costs, according to a study by Harvard Business School.

In order to combat the toll the pandemic has had on employee mental health and encourage time off, and since so many are still uncomfortable traveling, employers are updating their PTO policies and launching new benefits to encourage workers to take “staycations.”

Providing benefits that encourage employees to explore new hobbies could make them more excited to take time off while stuck at home, says Kathy Barber, vice president of benefits and compensation at Ayco.

At the start of the pandemic, Barber used her PTO to learn woodworking to decorate her home with restored



antiques. Now, she’s encouraging other companies to incorporate remote learning into their benefits.

“There are websites, like Udemy, that teach online classes about pretty much any hobby for under \$10,” Barber says. “Internally, we’ve also had employees teach yoga and cooking classes over Zoom.”

Rhiannon Staples, CMO at Hibob says employers need to make an effort to show employees that everyone, especially company leaders, use their vacation time. Her company created an employee communications platform that allows everyone in the company to see when every employee is taking vacation. ■

Additional source: Employee Benefit News.

Empathy... cont'd from Page 3

There are insights in every EAP report, and much more to learn if you ask for it. Your EAP knows of barriers to service that may be difficult for you to see. EAP data can inform you of culture issues that will never come up on a culture survey.

Don’t settle for mediocrity during these critical times. If your mental health benefits have barriers, remove them. If your EAP isn’t delivering what you need, figure out why and consider a change. Unless your EAP has direct access to your employee census, EAP visibility is on you!

Summary

Behavioral health has never been as important as it is right now. How organizations address their

employees’ behavioral health — a function of empathy — is no less important than how organizations address their financial health. Workforces are experiencing unprecedented challenges. We know that. There is no better time than now to engage the workforce via some of the actions defined in this article. ■

Kathleen Greer is the Founder of KGA, Inc., in Southboro, Massachusetts, and a frequent contributor to “Employee Benefit News” where this article originally appeared at (www.employeebenefitadviser.com).

Bryan Kohl is SVP at Mindwise Innovations, a firm that equips schools, workplaces, colleges, and communities with tools to help them address mental health issues, substance use, and suicide risk.