

Notes: How to Support Your Team's Mental Health A Small Giants Roundtable

November 17th, 2020

Resources:

- [Mental Health Screening Tests](#)
- [Tier1's Start the Conversation about Mental Health Journey Map](#)
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
 - [Halcyon](#)
 - [Anthem](#)

Challenge #1: How do I talk to my team about mental health?

“Managing that fine balance between caring about the mental health and well-being of team members with their privacy/personal boundaries. For example, we heard from our parents with young children that they were struggling, so we started a parent support group — but it didn’t take off. What could we be doing differently to get people to open up?”

Solutions:

- **Create consistent channels of communication:** We have a team call every Friday called Drinking Fridays. We send out coffee, tea, wine, beer — whatever folks want to drink. We talk about the positive outcomes of what’s happening, but also use this time to build comfort and point out certain individuals that they can come and talk to if they’re having issues. That way, we provide mental health messaging in a fun setting. It’s a small gesture to open up the opportunity for folks to speak to us. We’ve had people call in and just want to talk. People were nervous at first, but with time, it pays off.
- **Stick with it.** People may be appreciating the effort put forth, even if they’re not taking advantage of it. In other cases, people may be simply observing what’s being said and benefiting from it, but not participating. Others take longer to warm up and participate.
- **Try a lot of different things to see what works.** Our attention is pulled in a lot of different directions right now. We use Slack for internal communication. On Slack, we host games (through Slack integration) at certain times. Not everyone comes every day,



**SMALL GIANTS
COMMUNITY**

but they have the opportunity to join in. Create fun channels for bonding and relationship building, like #HomewardBound to share funny WFH stories.

- **There's a stigma with mental health.** Leaders need to be vulnerable first and share their experiences if employees are going to be comfortable talking about it.
- **Use established company communications to talk about mental health.** We did a company-wide mental health day to establish the importance of this topic and show that the company prioritizes it. From there, team leaders and managers are in charge of the vulnerability and building connections with their direct reports.
- **Try swapping 1:1s for going for a walk.** Keep that connection by asking them to share a nice photo or moment from the walk with their manager instead. These conversations prompt more intimate dialogue. Focus on efforts like this that encourage mentally-healthy behaviors that help keep people in a good mental health state.
- **Modeling is critical as leaders.** I model the behaviors I want to see in my team members. Life isn't perfect, we're all struggling. I model the behaviors I need to have for my own mental health. One impactful way for me is that I take all my 1:1 calls and go on a walk. I tell them, "I'm going out on a walk for our call, I'm joining audio only, heads up in case you want to do the same." I'm making proactive changes in my behavior and modeling that for them.
- **Normalize conversations about mental health.** We've been working on this for five years, and it takes time. If you start to ask each other about mental health, almost everyone has experienced something or knows someone in their family or inner circle who has. This past May, we took it to version 2.0 and took it virtual. It starts with educating everyone: the average length of time to get treatment is 11 years. Our first starting point is educating and normalizing mental health issues. Normalizing it starting with the leaders means leaders sharing their stories about why this is important to talk about.
- **Start the conversation and give people permission to share.** Leadership vulnerability is important. Tell your team what you're going through and open the dialogue. It's important these efforts don't end after Covid ends, this should be a part of the way we do business and people can talk about mental health at all times.

Challenge #2: How do I recognize a mental health crisis in an employee or colleague?

“Signs to look for in yourself and others of mental fatigue and ways to support self/one another.”

Solutions:

- **Behaviors to look out for:** Negative attitude, down character, being completely quiet during meetings.
- **Sudden change in environment or behaviors.** We had a team member who was all of a sudden never on camera, he was before. By talking to this team member one-on-one when we noticed a change, we were able to help with things going on in his personal life. Be aware of when things in the background have changed.
- **Be more available as a leader.** Check in more often, go to the shop more often if you have them. Look for people who seem more stressed. We had one employee in a rural area, no wi-fi, and a child who was crying every day in fear of failing out of school. We only knew because we asked — we helped him find Wi-Fi. Be more on the floor, more present and available than ever with the team.
- **Be more present as a leader.** Not to be underestimated: the importance of being truly present with team members. Take an active role in these conversations. Listen actively. Probe deeper with empowering, open-ended questions. Turn your phone off. Resist the urge to check email. Back to basics for managers.
- **Use technology to your favor.** Pay attention to who’s asking for help the most often right now. Even if it looks like that need is being met and they get the help they need, it might be a signal to you to reach out to the individual who asked for help. There’s often more going on behind the scenes that needs to be addressed. Use chats and your project management tools to find those red flags before they become an issue.
- **Be the “Chief Repeating Officer.”** We can think of ourselves as the “Chief Repeating Officers,” saying the same encouraging things over and over and over again as we meet with members of our team, like: we’re all in this together, this is new territory for all of us, we’re going to get through this, what you’re feeling is normal.” Not platitudes — sometimes reassuring words really help, especially when team members are feeling more alone or isolated.



SMALL GIANTS COMMUNITY

- **Is it a personal problem or organizational?** Are you dealing with mental health issues with just one or two individuals on your team — or is it 5, 10, or more people? When you're starting to see there are a lot of people struggling, it's likely an organizationally-driven problem. Look to your core values and your leadership team and see if they're being vulnerable enough, asking enough questions and boosting morale. What about your culture could be contributing to this problem?
- **It's all about relationships.** We're not mental health professionals, and in most instances, this isn't about mental health as a disease. Moreso, as leaders, we should be stopping to say "how are you doing?" and just listening. If we are consistent with the relationships we have, those issues will be uncovered.
- **Give people platforms.** Create different communication platforms for shy folks, and for folks with different communication preferences. Build relationships with every single team member and check in with everyone every single day. It's about taking those disruptors out — if your family is struggling or someone is scared for their health, they're not going to be productive at work. A leader's job is to give people platforms to share so we can help them solve these problems.

Challenge #3: How can we balance being supportive of mental health while also making sure stuff gets done?

"I'm seeing a dramatic uptick in employees calling off work the further we get into this pandemic. How can we support employees during this difficult time while also engaging them enough to get them to keep 'showing up?'"

Solutions:

- **Lead with the personal, follow with the work.** Start your meetings and check-ins with personal updates and find out what's going on in their lives and how you can help. Then talk about the work items that need to get done.
- **Catch it early and often.** Have the tools to monitor the key productivity behaviors that are important to your organization, like billable hours. We're being intentional about making sure people are meeting their billable hours. If we see someone is not on track to meet them, we're having those conversations earlier rather than later. Even if it's just a

few hours behind, we're checking in to make sure folks have a plan or answer any questions around meeting their KPIs. We're engaged in wanting to help them meet their goals. It's about noticing, and catching it early and often.

- **Be transparent about the state of the business.** Our team knows when we're projecting outcomes that aren't good due to low billable hours. So it's not a surprise to them when we ask for them to put in more hours or do more for the good of the business. The idea here is they understand why it's happening, why it's important, and how they can impact the outcomes.
- **Mental health half-days.** We've done a couple of mental health half-days where we shut down the whole company (paid) and didn't dock any PTO. It really was appreciated. We let our customers know about it too, and got a lot of praise for that.
- **Keep investing in learning and development.** Every year during performance review cycles, we have learning goals we establish with team members. It's a meld of their interests and their desires for growth. This allows for a creative way to engage them and for them to feel motivated and committed, and to know we're investing in them.
- **Brutal reality, credible hope.** We have town halls that are honest and transparent, yet hopeful. We ask for personal updates and people share their personal concerns and wins. Then from a company perspective, we share: Brutal Reality, Credible Hope. This means sharing what we're up against, what we're after and why, and the credible hope you leave with. This avoids dishonest cheerleading but also curbs some of the uncertainty.
- **Turn it back to the team.** Be honest about how the business is doing, but turn it back to them to ask for solutions. How can you help? What ideas do you have? Engage the team in the process of problem solving.

Challenge #4: The owners of my company only care about the numbers and not employees' mental health. What can I do to manage up and prevent burnout for those on the team?

"Our environment is really difficult, people are burning out. At the same time, my leadership team isn't interested in significant investments in mental health. I'm doing all I can on my own to

catch some of these issues, but we're burning through people. What tools and resources might help? And how can I make the organization leaders care?"

Solutions:

- **Show up as the best version of yourself.** All you can do is show up for your team, and show up as the best version of yourself. Leading up is difficult — try relating to the executives on the human experience they're neglecting. Frame the issue as a human issue and not just the numbers. I.e., "this issue is affecting team members in this way" helps shine light on a specific example. It makes them think about how they want to show up for these people, and it can change the owner's perspective. They may realize they don't want to burn these people out, and they don't want to lose these people.
- **Talk to the owners on their terms.** If all the leaders care about are numbers, frame the problem in terms of numbers. Here's what will happen when you do XYZ in numbers terms. For example, point to turnover, and show this is how much loss in income/productivity will occur if we don't do something about this. Translate the human problem into the numbers that they care about.
- **Use Employee Assistance Programs.** EAPs are a great resource for your teams. If you have an EAP and many aren't using it, encourage usage by being vulnerable. If you have, share that you've used it yourself for your own challenges, and talk about what it was like to use it (I.e., I picked up the phone and made the call). Younger employees may not know what EAPs are, so model that and talk about it often. Promote it periodically, explain that it's free and confidential. Also check out what your health insurance provider already offers: many have free programs like webinars, wellness challenges, etc.
- **Quantify 'how are you feeling?'** When it comes to employee morale and engagement, there's no reason you can't put a quantitative spin on it. Ask employees to rate on a scale of 1-10 how they are feeling. We have an option to share why, and you learn a lot this way. We learned that one employee just quit smoking and is feeling anxious, and another felt they had too many clients on their plate. This helps you pick up on small details and feel in tune to the culture, while also keeping a quantitative pulse on the organization.