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A New Era for Mental Health in the Workplace - by Les Hiscoe

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Les Hiscoe

We are in a new, much-needed era for prioritizing mental health at work. Businesses only perform as well as their employees, and nearly one-fifth of U.S. workers rate their mental health as fair or poor. Leaders across industries must be in lockstep with this paradigm shift to create an effective, supportive mental health program so everyone succeeds.

While incredibly rewarding, construction is one of the most taxing and challenging jobs—which can take a mental toll. Nearly 60% of construction workers reported mental health struggles, but only a third said they would communicate this to their employers. Construction specifically has the second highest suicide rate among major industries.

To allow everyone to bring their best selves to work each and every day, an effective approach to mental health in the workplace is critical. While it is the right thing to do, creating a safe and inclusive workplace can also lead to a strong and successful business. Employee health is business health. Engaged, supported, energized employees make world-class companies.

Establish the Business Imperative

Construction is complex, grueling work set in demanding environments. Years ago, I declared both safety and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) business imperatives. We introduced Shawmut and our network to the concept of safety of the entire person—expanding the notion of safety beyond physical to incorporate psychological and mental health. To create accountability and drive progress, our executive leadership team has safety and DEI efforts as goals and KPIs.

Operationalize the Work

Core to creating an inclusive workplace is providing an environment where people feel safe opening up about their struggles—without blame, stigma, or judgment. It needs to be integrated into the fabric of a company. We now have mental health included in all safety meetings, and during our new hire orientation. We also recently launched a Mental Health & Wellness Leadership Group, which already consists of more than 50 people, across functions, dedicated to identifying programs, initiatives, and paths to address the mental health crisis in the industry.

Lead by Example

New programs are only as strong and successful as the support behind them. Leaders must address mental health stigmas head-on, lead by example, and model self-care and work-life balance. Being cognizant of energy drains and managing teams' energy levels to help them thrive is a responsibility and goal for our leaders—they've undergone training focused on how to avoid or manage burnout.

Transparency is also key—as an employee-owned company, we share DEI and safety initiative progress, celebrating successes while highlighting areas of work. This creates a sense of ownership

and shared responsibility, opening channels for grassroots initiatives.

Provide Accessible Mental Health Benefits

At Shawmut, we have an intentional benefits strategy designed to support mental health and nurture wellness. This starts with our robust healthcare package, ample vacation and holidays, flexible work arrangements, and summer Fridays. Our mental health support includes well-being webinars, emotional and mental health support services, and a confidential and free Employee Assistance Program available 24/7 that offers short-term counseling and referrals.

Ultimately, prioritizing mental health in the construction industry and across all workplaces is not just a moral imperative but a business necessity. To foster a safe and inclusive work environment, leaders must embrace a holistic approach to employee well-being, addressing both physical and psychological safety. Investing in the mental health of employees is an investment in the success and sustainability of businesses, as engaged, supported, and cared for individuals drive organizational excellence.

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