# Who is Responsible for Employee Well-Being? The Role of Employers and Resourcing for the Mental Health of their Employees

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**Introduction**

Mental health has important implications in all aspects of our daily lives. In fact, due to the recent issues of how the world experienced COVID-19 (employee burnout, stress, PTSD), employee mental health is evidenced as inextricably bound to everything from resilience to employee longevity. The enhanced understanding of "employee-value" has also emerged as a principal theme given their tremendous value to the functioning life of any organization. The world understood this potential more so than ever as employees began feeling disconnected and disparaged by their employers amidst the pandemic, which resulted in something coined "the great resignation" (Morgan, 2021). Many resigned amidst feelings they had about their worth to their organization. Much of the sentiment employees harbored towards employers regarded the quality of their professional lives, their perceived value to their respective companies, and their own mental health as a result. One of the notables that came from the impact of the events of 2020-2022 was the need for greater mental health resources. Such resourcing for employee mental health services in the wake of critical incidents became, for many, a call for greater *corporate social responsibility*.

In this Whitepaper, the author examines a few key perspectives regarding mental health resourcing for employees provided by companies, the perceptions and realities of employers and employees when it comes to such resources, and some important evidence regarding ways to ensure engagement of company-provided resources for those needing assistance. Additionally the author considers how the L.E.A.D. initiative, a concept for training leaders from the American Psychiatric Association, can help businesses embrace better processes for mental health during harsh times.

**Provisioning Mental Health Resources: Employees and Responsibilization**

The emphasis on "who" is responsible for mental health care has been a factor in the social ontology of relational responsibilities from everyone including state and government agencies to corporations, and ultimately individuals themselves (Rishworth, 2022). In fact, over the past 20 years, the responsibilization, as defined by Wakefield and Fleming (2008) as a process where subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would've been the duty of another, became part of a larger kind of problematizing considering who is truly responsible for the resourcing of mental health care. COVID-19, however, created a powerful spotlight on front-line workers as the pandemic took hold and became the most challenging public health crisis of our time.

Much of what was observed from the pandemic came from those who met the harsh circumstances of the phenomenon immediately, namely, those on the front lines of healthcare dealing with sick patients while also being exposed themselves, as well as the struggles of teachers in the classrooms and their students who as well were exposed to the virus. In addition, employees across the spectrum from those who worked in fast-food franchises to those in grocery stores and other important economically crucial consumer-dependent goods, felt the immense pressure in their roles during the onset of COVID-19 (Dong et al., 2022).

**How Americans See Their Employer as a Source for Mental Health Support**

As a result, due to the confluent aspects of social phenomena and crises experienced by Americans over the past several years, the onslaught of mental health issues arising in the workplace has been unlike any other time in history. According to the most recent University of Phoenix *Career Optimism Index* released for the year 2022, nearly half (48%) of Americans say that they need support and resources for managing their mental health and well-being needs, as
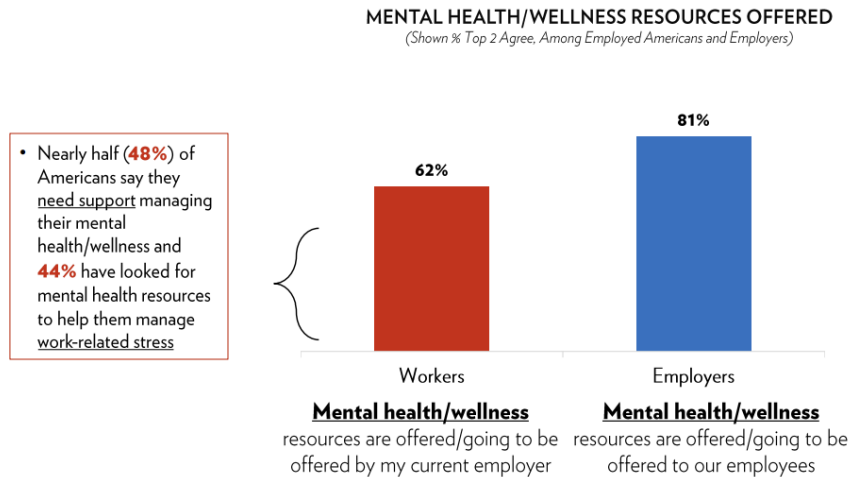
well as 44% reporting that they have actively sought out mental health resources to help them

manage their work-related stressors.

During the onset of COVID-19 for example, the University of Phoenix offered

employees the opportunity to engage a variety of mental health resources such as those provided

through the school's partnership with a third-party healthcare company known as Ginger. This

organization provides a great number of robust mental health resources from telehealth to online

therapy chat, as well as a number of other important elements like reading materials and online

webinars. Examples like this were being provided in a variety of organizations during the onset

of the pandemic, which became extremely important for employees who were stressed by the

pandemic and its conditions.

In addition, the Career Optimism Index also revealed that 44% of employees had looked

for mental health resources on their own to help them manage their work-related stress. Some of

the results also demonstrate a disparity between the employees (62%) perceptions and awareness

of available resources offered by their organizations and employer's perceptions (81%) of

extended mental health options for employees (see Figure 1). Although the disparity in

perception is not large (19%), it is still meaningful enough to demonstrate that employee

perceptions are not evenly matched with their employers' perceptions when it comes to

availability of mental health resources as opportunities for employees through their organization.

Figure 1



AMERICANS MAY NOT SEE THEIR EMPLOYER AS A SOURCE OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT – LESS THAN HALF HAVE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF THE RESOURCES THEIR EMPLOYERS OFFER

MENTAL HEALTH/WELLNESS RESOURCES OFFERED
*(Shown % Top 2 Agree, Among Employed Americans and Employers)*

- Nearly half (**48%**) of Americans say they <u>need support</u> managing their mental health/wellness and **44%** have looked for mental health resources to help them manage <u>work-related stress</u>

62%

81%

Workers

Employers

**Mental health/wellness** resources are offered/going to be offered by my current employer

**Mental health/wellness** resources are offered/going to be offered to our employees

Q15: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your mental health/well-being? Base: 2021/2022 Gen Pop n=5000/n=5000. Q25: For the below activities, please indicate the level of support you feel you need with each. Base: Gen Pop n=5000. Q52: Which of the following resources, if any, are offered by your current employer? Base: Among those Employed n=4404. Q52_EMP. Which of the following resources, if any, do you offer to your employees? Base: Employers n=500    14

## Making Resourcing More Accessible

As more people transitioned to online during the pandemic, there became an even greater imperative to create ways of reaching employees to help them deal with the variety of issues they might have been suffering from during the rise of the COVID-19. To this end, 2022 saw the call for some workers to return to the office and re-engage face to face environments, which also perpetuated trepidation and fear for those returning to the workplace (Theimer, 2022). However, the need for mental health support and the realities of what companies had offered was also very revealing. According to the Harris poll which surveyed over 2,000 U.S. adults, the results depicted nearly 23% of workers who said their employer had introduced new mental health services during the pandemic and additionally, over a third (36%) of employees who said their companies had always offered some kind of mental health support (Leonhardt, 2022). As of early 2022, the request has only grown for companies to allocate not just more mental health resources

based on the data that has emerged from the past few years, but for leaders to take a role in ushering in and advocating for mental health for employees.

A few important insights on all of this comes from Gloria Salinas, who is the Managing Director, Economic Development for DRC, a mental health nonprofit, is that "If businesses focused on mental health more, for every $1 they invest in mental health, they would turn around and save $4" (Salinas, 2020). Salinas also mentioned that in 2019, corporate America lost nearly $3 billion because of mental health and stress related issues in the workplace (Salinas, 2020). Such sobering statistics underscore what corporate America is coming to understand in the way of employee burnout and higher stress levels amongst employees. Many organizations have seen the need to address the underserved problems arising in corporate America when it comes to mental health. The next section details one such addition that the American Psychiatric Association Foundation sees as a way to help business leaders adopt better employee practices and processes for their respective organizations. It may serve as an important tool for stewarding more communication between leaders and their employees while also building resilience and hardiness amongst employees during impacting issues as they arise in the future.

**How Employers Can Help Support By Focusing on Four Key Areas Depicted By L.E.A.D.**

The Center for Workplace Mental Health, as part of the American Psychiatric Association, put together an important resource for business and industry leaders to help focus on mental health care for employees in such precarious times. The following is how they depict the acronym L.E.A.D. which stands for leadership, effective communication, adapting to change, and doubling down on access to care (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022). Here is how each of these particular areas of L.E.A.D. can be adopted by organizational leadership to compliment current resources as mainstay practices for highlighting awareness.

*Leadership*

Leadership as the first component**,** is positioned to address the needs of mental health care resourcing for employees. Here is this can be more effective for leadership.

- Reassurance – the importance of reassuring employees in turbulent times is an important part of helping them feel calmer and more in control. Leaders can help by building key alliances with their employees through demonstrating that management staff have many of the same concerns and questions. Sometimes leaders do not have all the answers, but, their willingness to step up to helping employees by delivering calming reassurances can help normalize situations. Communication at this level becomes a top of mind process for leaders using innovative means such as discussions during individual meetings to the extent that is feasible, and in small groups, as well as during online town hall meetings. (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- Demonstrating good behavior and showing empathy – it's important to acknowledge the breach and disruptions that might be encountered during crisis situations so it's important to let employees know that such situations are also difficult for leaders as well. Leaders can set the tone and culture of organizations by showing that they care by encouraging people to take care of themselves and to share what they're doing as well to stay healthy and well. This requires leaders to get outside of their own comfort zone. Demonstrating reassurances while also allowing some vulnerability conveys to employees that they are not alone (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- Making mental health transparent – If we know, based on research, that mental health issues are on the rise, then we need to acknowledge their presence as well in the workplace. There is no better time than now based on all the conditions and affects that have resulted from the pandemic to openly talk about mental health. It is a subject that has often remained in the shadows and as such, only leads to negative outcomes when suppressed or ignored. Leaders' opportunities to speak to employees about the rising rates of mental health issues can open the door to better process and policies for mental health while also being encouraging, fostering a culture that cares for its employee's psychological health. If it is communicated from the highest level of organizations, then it truly reinforces the initiatives and ushers in more potentials for employees so that they can feel safe in their pursuit of seeking healthcare through company's resources (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

*Effective Communication*

Effective Communication should be a major priority during hard times.

- Creating routines for mental health communication – One of the most prominent details that has developed from the pandemic has been the importance of transparent and honest communication to employees. This is a distinct departure from otherwise unidirectional (top-down) communications that are standard with companies. Leaders and those in HR, as well as supervisors and managers, need to routinely check-in with employees about life and mental health. Weekly check-ins should be encouraged and adopted as mainstream processes for organizations who seek to help employees build better processes for self-care, stress

management, resiliency, self-efficacy, and more. Being able to ask employees what support they need even if a company has resources is an important way to monitor whether the consumption of current resources is doing its job or not. It is also a way to foster communication that provides employees a voice. (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- Listening to listen – Listening during challenging times is perhaps one of the quintessential ways to ensure employee trust. Organizations can do a better job at providing feedback loops that allow employees to not only share their concerns, but to also ask questions and to seek information on key issues they might be experiencing. This could include digital and online options such as Q&A sessions that complement online meetings or in one-on-one virtual meetings. Finding ways to insert a quality-specific listening moment by asking employees how they are doing can help create safe spaces for employees in a very structured way (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- The importance of a trusted source – Although certain impactful situations can have a great deal of uncertainty behind them, helping employees through conflicting information they might have about the impact of a situation can help diminish fears and anxiety. Leaders can take the opportunity to be *transparent* by building in updates that are timely and honest, so that they can build trust within their own workforce and human capital (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

### *Adapt to Change*

Adapting to change opens up an organization's *agility* factor.

- Realigning organizational processes and practices – The *agility* of an organization to respond to a changing landscape due to circumstances allows for companies to respond proactively if they are willing to be flexible. This can be done by considering mental health and re-setting policies around reasonable expectations. Organizations should routinely review their policies and practices for addressing the needs of employees and helping them fell healthy and safe (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- A willingness to modify leadership styles – Most organizations have perhaps a variety of leadership styles in their senior leaders to supervisors, and managers. Not all leaders, however, are used to being empathic, compassionate or relational. When leaders work collaboratively across organizations while listening to employee needs, they can work towards creative solutions and positive outcomes by simply modifying aspects of how they have led in the past. Some situations call for more compassionate flexibility or autonomy for employees, and this kind of modification can go a long way (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

- Helping create employee connections – For several years the pandemic separated much of the social interactions that previously may have occurred in face-to-face business exchanges. As well, for many, migrating back to the workplace may have felt a bit awkward as COVID-19 recessed a bit. Employers can help the continuity when such transitions occur by reinforcing "employee connections" whether it is through employee resource groups or peer groups. Such collective networks can be important vehicles for emotional ventilation, as well as important feedback to assist during challenging times (The American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2022).

***Double Down on Access to Care***

Doubling down when it comes to access for mental health care is important, as was demonstrated during the pandemic. Since 2020, the world has witnessed and experienced what some might call a "perfect storm" of events, which included the pandemic, social protests taking place in communities, policing issues, government instability, and a consistent barrage of bad news fed to the public daily by media sources. In this, the rise of mental health care was being tracked prodigiously by many organizations to help understand what people began experiencing in the way of psychological issues. According to Fiorenzato & Cona:

> Emerging data from a large cohort of low-income adults, one year after the start of the pandemic in United States (US), explored the COVID-19 related stressors linked to depression and anxiety, showing that adults facing multiple stressors had worsening mental health symptoms over one year. (2022)

Organizations in such instances must double their efforts to gain a good grasp of how environment shapes its employees. Here are a few ways.

- Leaders can play a key role in helping employees gain access that is effective, timely and affordable. Leaders can themselves, share health and well-being resources with employees directly during meetings and in one-on-ones.

- Leaders may also encourage employees to notice changes in themselves. Checking in with group and individuals periodically and encouraging them to let someone know what they are experiencing is key. As well, leaders can act accordingly by offering to connect people with healthcare services and supports that might be offered through their respective organization. Organizations and leaders might also consider offering interactive stress- management training opportunities to promote resiliency or

creating affinity groups as resources (The American Psychiatric Association

Foundation, 2022).

The importance of what society has learned over the past several years regarding mental

health amongst employees and the rising rates of healthcare issues burgeoning currently, ensures

that many cannot turn back now, risking losing their valuable human capital, but instead should

open up better pathways for addressing mental health. The future will tell what progress has

taken place with the hope that companies begin offering more resourcing for employees,

especially as more unforeseen issues could arise in the years to come.

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