Applying 2020’s Lessons on Change to Mental Health

by Bob Swanson

During this challenging pandemic, our sense of normalcy has changed. Many of our assumptions have been challenged. Some assumptions such as if an employee works from home, their performance will be much less than that in the workplace; or a virtual meeting will not be as productive as an in-person meeting are being debated.

I believe we have learned to make adjustments and be more open to new ways of doing things out of necessity this year. As a new normal evolves, there will be significant impact on what your employees and customers may expect, and how your business functions. There may also be significant impact on design and function as new buildings are constructed.

What does this have to do with mental health? With change, good or bad, comes the potential for increased stress. Higher stress can cause physical and mental health issues that ultimately impact dependability, productivity, quality, safety and morale. That’s the bad news. The good news is there are remedies to these challenges, and you can play a role in being an agent for positive change.

I would like you to reflect on these words: positive, care and belonging. How do these words fit into your company’s culture? First, do you project and expect a positive attitude. I would submit that one of your most important responsibilities is to project or sell positivity to everyone that you deal with including employees, customers, suppliers, labor representatives, etc. Everyone likes to deal with someone who has a positive outlook.

The second word is care. Do your employees know that you care about their total well-being, and not just their work output? While watching a recent episode of the Undercover Boss, it struck me how little the boss really knew about his employees until he wore a disguise. Employees want to tell their personal stories if they are given the opportunity. It is up to you to take the time to provide those opportunities and listen to their life stories. Famous poet Maya Angelou, once said: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

The third word is belonging. I would submit that we all have a basic desire and need to belong. Centuries ago, humans belonged to clans and tribes largely for safety reasons. We now know that belonging enhances who we are. The pandemic, however, has disrupted our ability to participate fully in the groups that we need for our mental and emotional health.

Does your company culture encourage a sense of belonging and being part of something bigger than each person? As I have read obituaries and attended funerals, I have noticed the importance of belonging. Obituaries often mention the military branch of service, years of employment with a company, church
Applying 2020’s Lessons on Change to Mental Health

by Bob Swanson

membership, etc. Beside family photos during bereavement visitation, it is common to see work photos, plaques, other recognition from work, and company and union caps.

The pandemic has allowed each us to reflect on what was and what we want to come next. Richard Leider talks about lightening your load to make room for new things in his book *Repacking Your Bags*. As the new year arrives and when a new normal begins to evolve, what do you want to and intend to do different in your company?

I wish all of you a happy, healthy and prosperous 2021.