Creating a Culture to Break the Silence by Bob Swanson
February 2018

During the past three months, four FCA members have contacted me to discuss their daily journey with a family member living with a mental illness. In just the last month, two construction industry executives have contacted me regarding the suicide death of an employee. These calls are troubling, but I am encouraged that we are “breaking the silence.” A key to moving forward is providing an atmosphere in each of your companies where it is safe to talk about mental illness, addiction and suicide.

Employees living with a mental illness, addiction or suicidal thoughts need the full support of their employer. Over 60 percent of those who live with these illnesses never receive the treatment they deserve due to shame, stigma and fear of jeopardizing their employment. Would one of your employees have those same concerns if they had a serious physical illness? There shouldn’t be any difference in the support our employers and industry provides.

Mental illnesses don’t just impact the individual living with them, but those around them as well. Employees who are caregivers also require the full support of their employer. A caregiver of someone with a mental illness (including addiction) lives with a great deal of shame and guilt that a caregiver of someone with a physical illness doesn’t experience. It is therefore more difficult for such a caregiver to ask for help.

When tragedy strikes and an employee dies by suicide, that impact lingers for a long time. Fellow employees will often be troubled trying to understand what happened and why, and some employees may even be haunted by what they could have done to prevent it. Additionally, the immediate family of the deceased employee will be burdened by shame, blame and guilt in addition to the normal feelings of grief.

It has been my experience that our industry has a culture of “suck it up” and “get the job done.” This applies to both field and office employees, and to the boss. I spent much of my career impacted by this thinking.

Instead of solely observing individual performance, I suggest it is critical to ask why the performance of an employee is changing. A company culture that creates a safe environment for an employee to seek help, and a culture that encourages supervisors to address performance issues in a new way will increase productivity, work quality, safe work practices and employee loyalty. I will further discuss a new way for our industry to address this issue next month.

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.