To fully support employees who are living with a mental illness, addiction or suicidal thoughts, you need to change your company culture. How does one create a new company culture? First, management must be fully committed, and be willing to, “walk the walk,” not just “talk the talk.” Are your employees the most important part of your company? Do you care for your employees as only employees, or are they part of your company family?

Once you’ve initiated the culture change, the next step is to create a safe environment where it is not only okay to ask for help when there is a need, but it is considered a sign of strength. There should be no judgment from you or anyone else. The focus must be on listening and providing support and resources – not on telling someone what to do. Trust, honesty and confidentiality are absolutely required.

Next, provide educational opportunities regarding numerous topics such as mental illness, addiction, suicide prevention, financial management and planning, adolescent behavior, personal relations, etc. This could include payroll inserts, toolbox talks, and reference to your company and industry Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). Knowledge is powerful.

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The old adage that “my personal problems don’t impact my work” is totally false. We are whole beings, and what happens outside of work impacts our work performance. Furthermore what happens at work impacts our personal lives.

After you have created a caring culture and a safe environment, you will find that employees will be more willing to let you know why they are struggling, and why their performance is not what both you and they desire. The net result is that performance issues get resolved, and you can avoid terminating a good employee who happens to be dealing with difficult issues. Not only will that employee be more productive, but the loyalty and dedication of that employee will be extensive.

In my previous work life of “old Bob,” it was common to address an employee performance problem by telling the employee to get their s*** together, or they would be terminated. I slowly discovered a much more effective way to address this issue by having a one-on-one discussion with the employee with genuine concern.

Here’s an example on how to start that conversation: “Lately, I’ve noticed a distinct change in your attitude, your behavior, and your performance, and I’m very concerned about this. You are a valuable employee, and it appears something is having a negative impact on you. Are you aware of anything that could have caused this change? Would you like to discuss this with me, or would you like to use our EAP program? How can I be of help?” Not only you, but all of your supervisors need to be able to interact in a similar manner.

You have safety programs to ensure that your employees return home each day without injury. A caring culture will ensure that your employees are at the top of their “A game” each day. As with a good safety program, this doesn’t ultimately cost money, but it saves money and lives.

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.