

BENEFITS LAW

JOURNAL

Professional Athletes' Mental Health Issues Serve as Wakeup Call: Three Key Pillars for Employers to Address Mental Wellbeing

By Raeann Burgo

In this article, the author offers three areas to help employers begin to build an employee mental health workplace safety plan.

A Major League Baseball pitcher. A professional golfer scheduled to tee off at the Masters. A first-team all-NBA basketball player, not to mention a league veteran. Four elite professional athletes made headlines recently, each opening up to the world about the mental health struggles they have dealt with both on and off their fields of competition. Colorado Rockies player Daniel Bard was just placed on the 10-day injured list due to anxiety, Aaron Wise withdrew from the Masters Tournament to focus on his mental health last week, Memphis Grizzlies All-Star Ja Morant took several weeks away from basketball to seek counseling to better help deal with stress (in the wake of a high-profile suspension), and Chicago Bulls veteran Andre Drummond just took a one-game absence to focus on his mental health.

The national discussion surrounding these high-profile incidents is a stark reminder that employee mental health needs to be addressed

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by employers. This article provides a three-step plan you can implement to start this process at your workplace.

STIGMAS EXIST EVEN AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE

The recent dilemmas faced by these athletes underlines the crushing stigma that surrounds mental health. If each had been forced to perform their job in their current mental health state, it would have impacted their performance and could have had consequences to their careers or even their safety. Yet, when each spoke out in an attempt to protect their mental health, they still faced backlash from fans and sports pundits.

Although these situations may be extreme examples of the stigma surrounding mental health, employers cannot ignore that employees are waving red flags of stress and burnout at your workplaces. And if they can happen to these most elite of competitors, they can happen at your organization. The widespread return to the office will no doubt ensure that those red flags are raised higher. The question is: Will you be looking for them?

EMPLOYEES WANT – AND NEED – YOUR HELP

Employees are clearer than ever that mental wellbeing is at the top of their list. In a recent survey,¹ employees ranked mental wellbeing as their number one concern – beating out physical, social, professional and financial wellbeing.

However, there is a disconnect between executive-level and lower-level workers. Chief executive officers surveyed were more concerned about financial wellbeing. This highlights the need for leaders at the highest levels to realize they may need to focus on employee mental health. Ignoring mental health issues is no longer an option when there are talent shortages and 80% of remote workers say they would leave their current job for one that prioritizes mental wellbeing.

Traditional mental health and wellbeing resources, such as EAP and meditation apps, are no longer enough. This is evident from the drop during the pandemic in employee use of what is probably typical mental health resources (employee assistance programs likely being the biggest) – a time in which you would think employees were most utilizing these resources. This, coupled with the staggering mid-pandemic statistic that 76% of employees believe their company should be doing more to protect their mental health,

underscores why employers and leaders need to take substantive action steps now.

While employers are focused on ways to protect their employees' physical safety at work, many are missing a key component – the impact the work environment has on an employee's mental health. After all, employee mental health is also a workplace safety issue.

3 STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO POSITIVELY IMPACT EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

Just like any workplace safety issue, employers must have a plan to address it. Here are three areas to help you begin to build an employee mental health workplace safety plan:

1. Ending the Stigma

The biggest challenge employers face is removing the stigma associated with mental issues. People are afraid to speak up about mental health problems for fear of being seen as incapable of performing their job or generally having something wrong with them. The most effective way to overcome this stigma is for leadership to start the conversation on mental health. It may be a cliché, but leading by example works.

2. Gathering Employee Input

The workforce and culture are different in every business. The best way to address employee mental health is to understand how the work environment is impacting employees. Key questions should focus on how employees feel about workload, schedules, flexibility, leadership, culture, and communication.

3. Incorporating Education and Training

You should consider rolling out mental health awareness and first responders training. This entails training your frontline managers on how to spot when an employee is in distress and then how to have an empathetic, confidential, and effective discussion with the employee on sensitive topics. This training should be coupled with a review of the Americans with Disabilities Act interactive process with a focus on mental impairments.

THE PLAN IN ACTION

Focusing on mental wellbeing could have dramatic impacts in ways you might not even expect. For example, an employer that is at a loss for how to get its workforce to buy into a key company initiative could consider the issue from a mental health and wellbeing perspective. What if you acknowledged the stress and struggle your employees are under and instituted a mental health safety initiative to support your workforce? Could a boost in employee mental wellbeing positively impact their performance and willingness to invest their time and energy in your corporate initiative? Quite possibly – but it could also reap other rewards far beyond what you might imagine.

NOTE

1. <https://www.conference-board.org/topics/natural-disasters-pandemics/press/Survey-Impact-on-Well-Being>.

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Volume 36, Number 2, pages 36–39, with permission from
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