



BELONGING AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

October 2022
Insights Forum:
Executive Summary





THE OCTOBER INSIGHTS FORUM FOCUSED ON **BELONGING** AND **MENTAL HEALTH** IN THE **WORKPLACE**, TWO AREAS THAT HAVE RECEIVED INCREASED ATTENTION SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

MENTAL HEALTH IS A DEFINITE CONCERN:

New research presented by Ragan Decker, Ph.D., lead researcher for the SHRM Research, finds executives are concerned about employee mental health. Specifically, the concerns are about:

Employee stress:

79%

of HR executives

Employee burnout:

76%

of HR executives

Employee mental health:

66%

of HR executives

HOW ARE ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH?

To best support employees' mental health, it is important for organizations to offer both employee resources and to build a culture supportive of mental health. However, the SHRM Research found that only about **1 in 4** organizations are succeeding in both of these areas:

How culture and resources add up

High resources but
an *unsupportive*
culture **18%**

High resources and
a *supportive*
culture **24%**

Low resources and
an *unsupportive*
culture **38%**

Low resources but
a *supportive*
culture **21%**



“Resources can be things like an employee assistance program, educational resources on mental health, mental health support groups, training, mental health apps, and mental health coverage, just to name a few,” Decker said. “Organizations that foster a culture that supports employee mental health have leaders and managers that model good mental health practices. They create spaces where employees feel safe voicing their opinions. And they have managers that regularly check in with employees.”

ARE WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

Evaluating the effectiveness of mental health programs **isn't particularly difficult** – but very few organizations are doing so. One reason they should measure the results of mental health resources is that **85%** of organizations that evaluate their programs see a **positive return** on investment, compared with **33%** of organizations that don't evaluate their programs.

EVALUATING MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

62% of HR executives say it's not difficult to evaluate



Only 17% say their organization evaluates the effectiveness



77% of organizations made changes after an assessment

“It’s also important to create a culture that supports employee mental health,” Decker said. “So executives who want to create a culture that supports employee mental health should model good mental health practices.”

CREATING A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS MENTAL HEALTH

Model good mental health practices:

Only around half of HR professionals say senior leaders (53%) and managers (52%) model good mental health practices for employees.

Regularly check in with

employees: 68% of HR professionals say managers regularly check in with their employees.

Promote psychological safety at

work: 77% of HR professionals say their organization encourages open and transparent communication.

THE MENTAL HEALTH BUSINESS CASE:



SHRM Research finds that there is a **solid business case** for supporting employee mental health. Organizations that successfully create a workplace that supports employee mental health are **more likely to be competitive** with peer organizations in today's job market, **exceed** their 2022 business goals and **achieve** retention goals. What's more, research conducted in 2021 found that **35%** of U.S. workers value mental health benefits over a pay raise. ¹

1: Mental Health Research, SHRM Research Institute, 2021

ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE **VERY SUCCESSFUL** AT CREATING A WORKPLACE THAT SUPPORTS EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO:

Be competitive with peer organizations

Very successful: **92%**

Not successful: **79%**

Be competitive in today's job market

Very successful: **86%**

Not successful: **52%**

Exceed their 2022 business goals

Very successful: **70%**

Not successful: **54%**

Achieve their retention goals

Very successful: **49%**

Not successful: **16%**

BELONGING IN THE WORKPLACE:

Another psychological aspect of work is a **sense of belonging**, which is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion and identity within the organization. Belonging overlaps with DE&I efforts as well as mental health.

But, once again, few organizations provide both the resources and culture necessary to foster a strong sense of belonging.



How culture and resources add up

High resources but
an *unsupportive*
culture **19%**

High resources and
a *supportive*
culture **26%**

Low resources and
an *unsupportive*
culture **38%**

Low resources but
a *supportive*
culture **17%**

“By achieving belonging in the workplace, you’re also going to support employee mental health,”
Decker said.

EVALUATING AND MODELING:

As with mental health offerings few organizations are evaluating their mental health resources, despite the ease of doing so. **67%** of HR professionals say it is not difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of **belonging-related resources**, though few say their organization actually does so (25%). Of those who do evaluate their belonging-related resources, **81% made changes** after assessing their resources. The research also found that, as with mental health, leaders play an important role in creating a culture that supports belonging.



CREATING A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS BELONGING

- **Recognize contributions:** **78%** say employees are recognized for their contributions.
- **Seek input:** **49%** say managers seek employees' input before making decisions.
- **Encourage authenticity:** **78%** say employees are encouraged to be authentic at work.
- **Be responsive:** **81%** say managers respond to employee concerns.

ONCE AGAIN, ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE **VERY SUCCESSFUL** AT CULTIVATING A SENSE OF **BELONGING** IN THE WORKPLACE ARE MORE LIKELY TO:

Be competitive with peer organizations

Very successful: **94%**

Not successful: **77%**

Be competitive in today's job market

Very successful: **84%**

Not successful: **47%**

Exceed their 2022 business goals

Very successful: **79%**

Not successful: **49%**

Achieve their retention goals

Very successful: **55%**

Not successful: **11%**

MORE WORK AHEAD AT MOST ORGANIZATIONS:



The new SHRM research suggests many organizations **are supporting mental health and belonging** – at least to some extent. But most workplaces still have ample room for improvement, despite clear business incentives. “While the business case is apparent, and many have really bought into the importance of these initiatives, few are taking that more rigorous data-driven approach to evaluating these programs,” Decker said. “Without this evaluation, organizations might really struggle to reach that gold standard for support.”



PSYCHOTHERAPIST
LEAH MARONE:
LEADERS MUST MODEL
MENTAL HEALTH

“I’m a psychotherapist, and in the last four to five years, I’ve had the privilege of working with several businesses on everything around mental health,” said the forum’s guest speaker, author and psychotherapist Leah Marone.

*“I love that the phrase ‘**mental health**’ has been talked about more and that terms we normally see as clinical have been integrated into the conversation within corporate America.”*

HOW DO WE DEFINE MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Marone noted that when she asks executives to **define mental health**, their description involves a lack of specific symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, grief, and other negative emotions. But when she asks them to define physical health, the definition includes positive attributes, such as walking up a flight of stairs without being out of breath, the ability to do things that we want our bodies to do or maintaining a certain weight.

SO, WHAT'S A POSITIVE WAY TO DESCRIBE "MENTAL HEALTH?"

“A definition that I like to use when I refer to mental health is how well you can **show up, be present, cope, and connect** with your environment or the people within it,” Marone said.

“A lot of times, we tend to be clouded by false narratives, by our intense internal critic, by anxieties, by exhaustion that prevents us from showing up how we’d like to show up. If we feel like our mental health is taken care of, we’re able to transition from the many roles that we have, to maintain our health, set boundaries, and effectively transition from the many roles that we have.”



WHAT DOES A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS EMPLOYING MENTAL HEALTH LOOK LIKE?

“Most companies will say, ‘*We support mental health.*’ And they’re not wrong. But I think supporting mental health is not a one-and-done action, like saying, ‘*Hey, we have a gym membership.*’ It requires maintenance, just like our relationship with ourselves.”

Marone noted that most companies now check all the usual boxes on mental health support, such as access to an employee assistance program, paid time off, fitness plans, memberships and other self-care amenities, which, she added, are wonderful things. But simply setting those benefits up isn’t enough. The companies that differentiate themselves from that baseline create a sense of **safety** and **encouragement** for employees to use those benefits without guilt.

“It’s the ability to set boundaries and step away from, unfortunately, the urgency culture that we’ve all created and that most of us have fallen victim to. And it includes quality interaction with leaders.”

“simply setting those benefits up isn’t enough.”

HOW LEADERS CAN MODEL GOOD MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES

“Be mindful of when you’re communicating, how present you are and the boundaries that you set, not only for yourself but what you’re encouraging in other people, even when you think it’s not affecting someone,” Marone said. *“Really make the time away from work sacred for people.”*

Marone emphasized that leaders through an organization need to model behavior that demonstrates boundaries between work and personal life as well as taking time for self-care and recreation. A manager who is the first at work in the morning and the last to leave at night unconsciously communicates that work comes before everything else.

One example is sending immediate emails instead of scheduling them during working hours. *“When you’re sending emails, it creates this sense of urgency,”* Marone said. Another opportunity she raised is the power of leaders sharing their own experiences. *“Verbalizing that, ‘Man, this has been an intense week. I need to really take care of myself this weekend,’ and reiterating the importance of rejuvenation.”*

Marone recommended that leaders examine the amount of pressure, urgency and interruptions that workers endure and how

taxing that is on physical and mental health, as well as the ability to be productive. Then, leaders should define and model behaviors that reduce those types of stress.

Marone drew a parallel to parenting as a way to think about modeling. *“Our kids look more at what we do rather than what we say,”* she said. *“So, what we’re modeling non-verbally in our actions, how we communicate, how our body language speaks. We’re all watching our leaders set the tone, and we want to follow suit.”*



REMEMBER THAT
PEOPLE ARE DOING
THE BEST THEY CAN

Marone shared a story about a school of fish in the pond that notices one fish working hard but not going anywhere. The other fish don't know what to do and keep swimming along, not realizing that this one fish was caught by a hook and doing the best he could.

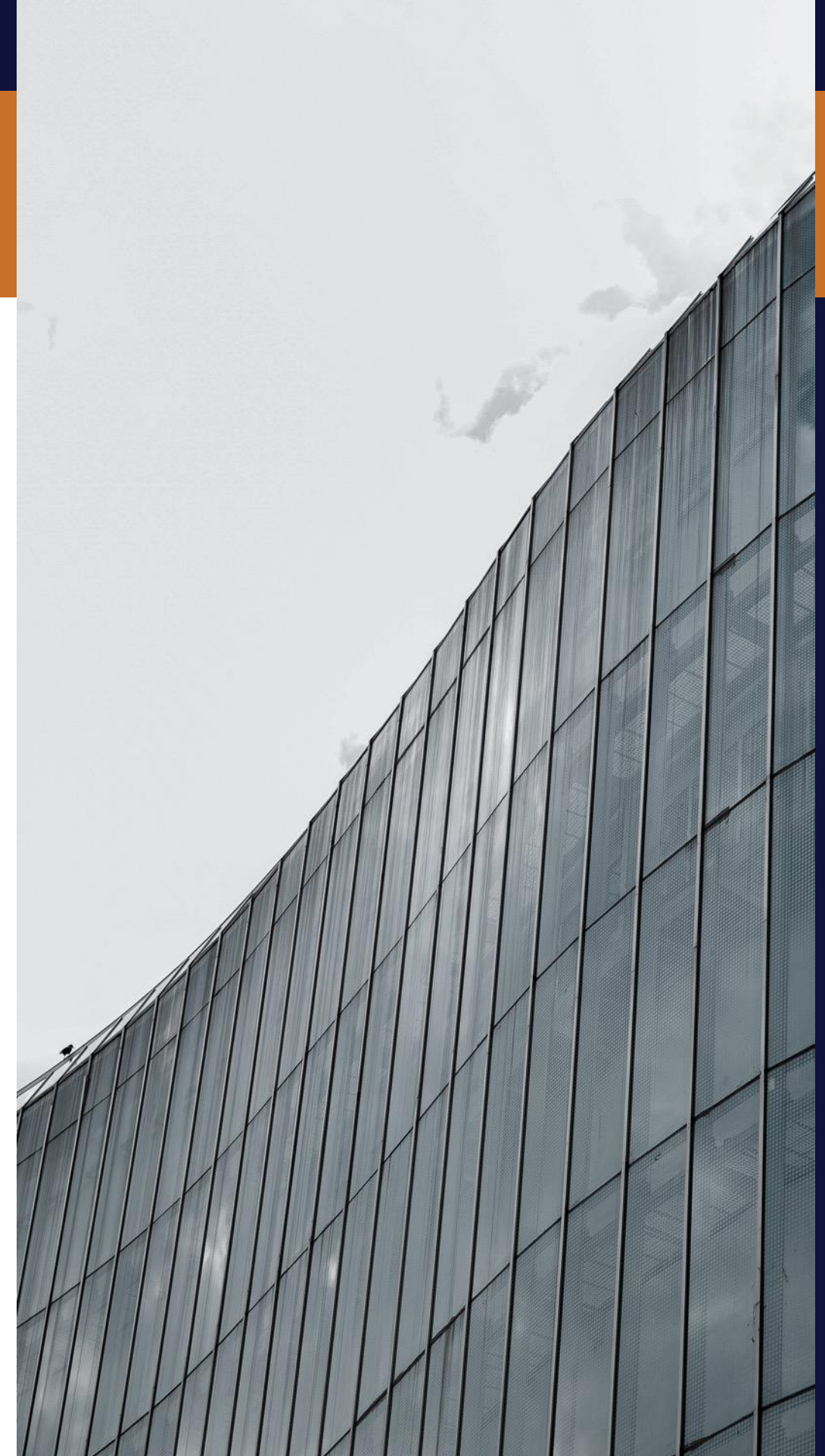
“I share this story to remind you that many of us are functioning with the chatter of anxiety, impostor syndrome, the internal critic, the exhaustion – all the things that are happening – and we’re doing the best that we can,” Marone said. *“If we function as leaders with the lens that people are doing the best that they can, it changes this whole scope of control and changes the whole dynamic of your relationship, how you view people, and how you can counter this productivity pressure and this urgency culture.”*

SELECTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE Q&A SESSION

What about the serious shortage of health providers in this area? When someone discloses a need for in-person, face-to-face help, there often are no providers taking new clients.

“Of course, I’m biased, but I think in-person therapy is great, but there are **virtual therapy platforms** that are a great alternative, such as *TalkSpace.com* and *BetterHealth.com*, where normally you can access someone very quickly.

Another resource is *PsychologyToday.com*, which has a great search engine for therapists where you can typically find providers that are available.”



SELECTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE Q&A SESSION

How do you influence C-suite executives on the benefits of making these changes for business?

Marone said that when she meets with CEOs, she emphasizes that this focus on mental health isn't going away.

“CEOs are the people that need to facilitate the change and the mindset shift that needs to happen, and a lot of it is fear-based,” Marone said. *“It’s fear that things are going to crumble. It’s fear of releasing some control. It’s fear that other people are not going to rise to the challenge.”*

One tactic is to use evaluations and data – such as the new research from SHRM presented in this forum – to make the business case for mental health.

“I wish I had a concrete answer, but I think the numbers and the turnover and, and all the things that a company might be suffering from will be a wake-up call that we’ve got to do something different.”

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