



CASE STUDY

‘IT’S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY’:

HOW UNDERSTANDING ITS CULTURE AND
CONTEXT HELPED INTERNATIONAL PAPER
SHAPE ITS MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

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AT A GLANCE

International Paper is a global leader in sustainable packing, operating in North America, Latin America, North Africa, and Europe. As a producer of fiber-based packaging solutions, International Paper delivers solutions that enable recycling and reduce waste.

International Paper employs a diverse workforce of more than 65,000 people globally in both union and nonunion settings. Across the company's mills and box plants, skilled mill operators, technicians, and production workers make products that people depend on every day.

Aligned with the company's overall mission, International Paper's approach to mental health and well-being is deeply rooted in safety — one of its core values. By integrating mental wellness into its core safety culture and making resources accessible and tailored, the company is fostering an environment where employees feel supported and empowered to seek care.

Underpinning the success of International Paper's mental health efforts are three key strategies:

- » Understanding its workplace culture and context.
- » Simplifying access to mental health support.
- » Empowering managers as the first line of defense.

"Above all else, we care about people, and as leaders, it's critical that we create a safe environment where our team members feel comfortable sharing and asking for the support they need to ensure both their physical and psychological safety."

— Andy Silvernail, Chairman and CEO of International Paper



UNDERSTANDING ITS WORKPLACE CULTURE AND CONTEXT

Many organizations address mental health challenges by opting for one-size-fits-all strategies that worked in other situations. However, these organizations often find that while this kind of approach can serve as a helpful starting point, it frequently falls short of expectations because the solutions are not tailored to unique organizational needs.

In contrast, International Paper is creating its mental health strategies with its specific workplace culture and context in mind. For example, International Paper understood that mental health stigma in its industry poses unique challenges for addressing employees' mental well-being. Research shows that male-dominated fields, such as manufacturing, often face higher rates of mental health issues and typically rank low in workplace health compared to other sectors.^{1,2} In addition, International Paper identified a “grin and bear it” culture within its workforce, which the company knew could discourage employees from seeking help during vulnerable times. “In many of our facilities, we are the sole employer in the area. Our workforce largely consists of rural shift workers who are the heart and soul of their communities,” said Nicole Cody, vice president of total rewards at International Paper. “There’s often a perception that you must be strong — for your family, your community, your shift line, and your crew.”

International Paper recognized that its mental health strategies needed to help employees overcome the mindset that they must always project strength. The company also needed to foster an environment where employees feel safe seeking support during difficult times. International Paper engaged stakeholders across the organization — from safety teams to manufacturing units to union leadership — who could help change the “grin and bear it” perception and make talking about mental health more commonplace.

International Paper has also strategically grounded its mental health initiatives in its safety culture. When employees struggle with mental health, their focus can waver, increasing the risk of physical safety incidents. By emphasizing how mental health connects back to physical safety, the company has found how to talk about mental health in a way that resonates with its workforce and aligns with broader company goals.

Notably, International Paper’s employee base is responding positively to these efforts. In fact, these efforts encouraged one employee to come forward and share his own mental health journey with the company’s broader safety organization. His willingness to be vulnerable and transparent resonated throughout the organization, reminding everyone that “it’s OK not to be OK.” This meaningful reminder has even inspired grassroots efforts among other employees to come forward and share their stories. “Those employees who have been brave and willing to share and be vulnerable and transparent with their own challenges, and the ways in which International Paper’s benefits have helped them, have spoken volumes across our workforce,” said Carmen Coleman, health and wellness benefits consultant at International Paper. “I don’t know that there has been anything more impactful than that.”

¹ Roche, A. M., Pidd, K., Fischer, J. A., Lee, N., Scarfe, A., and Kostadinov, V. *Men, Work, and Mental Health: A Systematic Review of Depression in Male-Dominated Industries and Occupations. Safety and Health at Work, 7(40, 268-283), 2016.*

² *Mind the Workplace, Mental Health America, 2017.*



By pairing these stories with efforts to make the company’s mental health resources more visible and accessible across its mills and other locations, International Paper has ensured that when employees do come forward, they feel supported from the start. By tailoring its mental health strategies to align with its organizational culture and context, International Paper has fostered greater employee buy-in and engagement, which helps ensure a cohesive and impactful approach.

THE BOGALUSA MILL WHISTLE

A Special Edition newsletter of International Paper Bogalusa Mill



HOW ARE YOU REALLY DOING?

Despite often being ignored in the workplace, mental health is one of the most common things employees struggle with.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM

Experts say that we’re all on a mental health continuum that’s constantly changing. Part of being human is to experience the ebb and flow of our mental health. Some of us are thriving, others are experiencing struggles or burnout, and still others are in distress.

IN CRISIS	STRUGGLING	SURVIVING	THRIVING	EXCELLING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very anxious • Very low mood • Absenteeism • Exhausted • Very poor sleep • Weight change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious • Low mood • Tired • Poor performance • Poor sleep • Poor appetite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worried • Irritable • Sad • Trouble sleeping • Distracted • Withdrawn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive • Calm • Performing • Sleeping well • Eating well • Socially active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheerful • Joyful • Energetic • Peak performance • Flow state • Fully realizing potential

At International Paper, we are here to support employees at every stage of the mental health continuum by:

- Protecting the mental health of employees who are thriving by creating an environment that minimizes exposure to stressors
- Provide support for employees who are newly experiencing mental health challenges
- Offer appropriate benefits for individuals and their family members who have greater or prolonged mental health needs
- Connecting employees in crisis to immediate care and treatment

Example provided by International Paper

“It is important to create a safe space where you can get transparent and honest feedback around what your employee base is experiencing. There are going to be elements of mental health that will be consistent across organizations, but there are also unique aspects of a company that can create a distinct set of mental health challenges. It is critical to get that feedback so that you are actually developing a strategy around what’s needed instead of what you think is needed, because oftentimes, there is a significant gap between those two sides of the coin.”

— Carmen Coleman, Health and Wellness Benefits Consultant at International Paper

SIMPLIFYING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Many organizations work hard to provide a range of mental health resources to support employee well-being but struggle to make employees aware of these benefits and how to access them. In fact, research shows that **2 in 3** U.S. workers are either unaware or only partially aware of the mental health resources available to them. What's more, when employees face a mental health crisis, this lack of awareness can lead to uncertainty about where to begin, making it harder for employees to receive support when they need it most.

What sets International Paper apart is its efforts to make its mental health benefits and employee assistance program (EAP) simple and accessible to employees. Recognizing that even a strong set of benefits are only as good as employees' awareness of and ability to use them, International Paper actively sought feedback from its workforce. The company's employees shared that while they appreciated the variety of resources available, the sheer number of choices made navigating them difficult. To address this feedback, in January 2024, International Paper introduced a new navigation solution for all employee benefits — mental health included — with the goal of simplifying access in times of need. This navigation solution provides a one-stop platform that connects employees with trained care advocates via phone or mobile app who can listen to employees' specific needs and help them identify the most appropriate resources, whether it's connecting them to the right support or recommending customized solutions. Additionally, care advocates can make referrals to other forms of care when they learn of an employee's need through an interaction. The guides keep a confidential record of previous interactions, enabling employees to continue seamlessly without having to repeat themselves or start over if they need further assistance. Since implementing the navigation solution:

- » **77%** of International Paper employees have engaged with the navigation solution for assistance with medical or behavioral health care.
- » Care advocates within the navigation solution helped make **over 2,400** referrals for employees in 2024, with many of those referrals being made to behavioral health care resources.

"I always refer to our navigation solution as a way to press the 'easy button.' When you're in the middle of a crisis and you need help right away, you don't have the time to think, 'Do I call vendor A, vendor B, or go somewhere else?' Now, we can help our employees realize that all they have to do is call a single number or download an app and engage with this solution, and they will be paired with support that can help walk them through wherever they need to go."

— Carmen Coleman, Health and Wellness Benefits Consultant at International Paper

³ Employee Mental Health in 2024: A Research Series, SHRM, 2024.



International Paper’s navigation solution has proven invaluable for its workforce, thanks to the company’s deep understanding of its organizational culture and context. Many of the company’s manufacturing locations are in rural areas, where in-person access to mental health care and resources is often limited. Additionally, International Paper employees are largely on shift-based schedules, which can make it difficult for them to plan appointments, potentially discouraging them from seeking support. To address these issues, the company sought vendors that have helped it expand its digital and virtual mental health options, ensuring employees in underserved areas can access care. The navigation solution further simplifies this process by offering availability across a wide range of hours, enabling employees to reach out for help at times most convenient for them. By tailoring its approach to the unique realities of its employee base, International Paper has made seeking mental health support easier for its workforce.



EMPOWERING MANAGERS AS THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

Many organizations place their mental health programs solely under their HR function, which plays a central role in managing mental health benefits and shaping policies and practices. While HR's leadership in these efforts is undeniably vital, it is important to acknowledge that HR departments often operate at a step removed from employees' day-to-day experiences. This separation can make it more challenging for HR to detect the subtler mental health struggles employees may face or identify early signs of distress that others who engage with workers daily could notice.

Rather than a separated approach, International Paper fosters collaboration between HR and managers to make managers the first line of defense, recognizing that they are better positioned to identify early signs of stress. Front-line leaders work closely with employees on a day-to-day basis, often sharing a unique bond and making them vital in bridging the gap between their teams and available mental health resources.

69%

of employees report that their managers influence their mental health.⁴

49%

Less than half of U.S. workers say their manager models good mental health practices for their team.⁵

To empower its front-line leaders, International Paper has focused on two key areas.

First, the company offers self-service training to help managers proactively identify potential mental health risks, recognize early signs of mental health concerns, and approach mental health conversations with tact and empathy. "When managers and supervisors are equipped and can talk from a place of genuine concern and reliability, it really helps with approaching mental health issues from a personal perspective," Coleman said.

Being able to recognize early signs of mental health challenges can be critical in preventing more serious issues. Without proper awareness, people often do not notice subtle signs such as changes in behavior, withdrawal, or declining performance. Proactive intervention allows managers to provide support before a situation escalates, improving employees' mental well-being. This is especially true when managers themselves model good mental health practices for their teams and work to create spaces where employees feel safe talking about mental health issues openly. When handled thoughtfully, these conversations can contribute to employees feeling more at ease and supported in their roles. Managers who communicate with understanding can build trust and provide reassurance, allowing employees to seek support without hesitation.



⁴ [The Impact of Work on Mental Health, UKG Workforce Institute, 2023.](#)

⁵ Employee Mental Health in 2024: A Research Series, SHRM, 2024.

Second, International Paper has developed and made available a library of toolkits designed to support managers in navigating a variety of mental health situations. These toolkits include decision trees and flowcharts to help leaders determine the best course of action based on the specific circumstances. The toolkits also outline a detailed list of relevant behavioral health resources available, the scenarios in which each resource may best serve employee needs, and who within the organization can help initiate the outreach process. Additionally, the toolkits describe example situations managers may encounter and pair these situations with suggested solutions and next steps. “We wanted to give our people managers a guide for how they could go about looping in the right resource or the right people in a given situation,” Coleman said. Importantly, multiple stakeholders, including teams from HR operations, benefits, legal, enterprise, and security, collaborated to create these toolkits. This comprehensive input ensured the toolkits cover a wide range of scenarios and consolidate key information into an accessible resource for managers. To further enhance support, the toolkits are also available to HR business partners across the organization, ensuring consistency and alignment. By streamlining the process and providing meaningful training to its managers, International Paper has empowered its front-line leaders to more effectively support employees’ mental health, creating a workplace culture where mental well-being is a shared responsibility.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS

International Paper's approach to supporting workforce mental health offers insights for other employers:

- » **Tailor mental health strategies to align with your workplace culture and context.** Tailoring mental health strategies to align with how your organization operates ensures that programs and offerings match employees' unique needs and address organization-specific obstacles.
- » **Align mental health initiatives with core organizational priorities.** Integrating mental health initiatives into broader strategic goals, such as safety, helps strengthen their relevance and impact, reinforcing the value of these initiatives to the company's overall mission.
- » **Leverage employee feedback to enhance the accessibility of mental health resources.** Regularly soliciting input from employees to identify obstacles in accessing mental health benefits enables employers to build offerings that employees can easily access and use.
- » **Simplify access to mental health benefits with a centralized solution.** Designing solutions that simplify the process for employees to access and understand the resources available provides a clear starting point in moments of need and allows employees to receive timely and effective support.
- » **Train managers to recognize and address mental health challenges.** Equipping managers with the skills to identify early signs of distress and to meaningfully engage in mental health conversations empowers them to act as the first line of defense. This also allows organizations to address potential issues early and connect employees to resources quickly.
- » **Develop practical toolkits for manager-led mental health support.** Creating accessible, scenario-based resources, such as decision trees and flowcharts, enables organizations to equip their managers with the confidence and knowledge necessary to assess mental health situations and determine the appropriate course of action.



RESOURCES

» **Understanding Your Workplace Culture and Context**

The *Harvard Business Review* article [Why Workplace Well-Being Programs Don't Achieve Better Outcomes](#) outlines why it is important for employers to adjust their mental health strategies to address structural barriers and provides advice for tailoring these strategies at an organizational level.

» **Simplifying Access to Mental Health Support**

The SHRM article [No 'Easy' Button for Mental Health Care Waiting Lists, but HR Can Help](#) emphasizes that while no single solution can address all mental health challenges, employers can take meaningful steps to simplify finding mental health care and make mental health benefits more accessible to employees.

» **Empowering Managers as the First Line of Defense**

Mental Health America's [Workplace Mental Health Training](#) guide connects employers to a list of trusted partners and resources to help them identify and implement the appropriate mental health training for their managers and broader workforce.





OUR PURPOSE IS TO ELEVATE HR

Our mission is to empower people and workplaces by advancing HR practices and by maximizing human potential. Our vision is to build a world of work that works for all.

BETTER WORKPLACES, BETTER WORLD.

SHRM.ORG