Mental Health – everyone’s business – a competitive advantage

1. INTRODUCTION

Wellbeing: Making organizations and individuals accountable for wellbeing as a driver of performance.

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We live in very volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times. For those in the working world, it is compounded by the workplace expecting more from their people – doing more with less; being always on through technology; driving efficiencies through cost cutting; facing and dealing with a much more demanding customer or consumer. These times are having a profound effect upon the wellbeing of employees across all sectors. I equate wellbeing to the ‘energy’ of people, which I believe is the most limiting resource in the working world today – not money, people or services and products, but people are just tired and worn out!! This assertion is being played out in the rising incidence of depression and anxiety in the workplace.

Poor mental health impacts everyone. With 30% of people personally experiencing mental health disorders, increases in depression - which is expected to be the leading disease burden by 2030 – is hampering the success of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The result of negative mental health impacting a range of areas including physical health and productivity costs $2.5 trillion USD a year and is expected to increase to $6 trillion USD by 2030 (Source “Mental illness stands today where HIV and AIDS were a couple of decades ago.” The Lancet, 2016)

The above data speaks for itself. How do organizations, big, medium, small and across all sectors address this issue, and why would they?

We need to view wellbeing as a key driver of individual and business performance. Organizations with high levels of employee wellbeing have outperformed the market by 2 -3% over a 25 year period (Prof Alex Edmans, London Business School, 2015). This should not be a surprise, as we all know what it is like to work with people who are highly energized versus those who have the ability to drain all energy from us. Energy should be seen as important as skills, knowledge, behaviors and experience in driving the performance of people, and organizations need to find ways to include this as a key component of their performance and development programs. Learning to have a development conversation about an employees’ level of energy as part of their performance or development plan should become a critical capability of line managers and coaches who all support organizations in the development of their people.

This seems so obvious, but why have we not done this? I would suggest this is because the workplace has lost its sense of humanity, it has expected employees to leave their personality and humanness at the door as they walk through it; you cannot talk about ‘the personal’ at work, yet organizations more and more are
creating a perceived expectation of 24/7, always on and so encroach on the personal
time of employees. The line between personal and work is very blurred today, and so begining to speak and engage in conversations about the whole person, ie their physical, emotional, mental and purpose or meaning, I would suggest is the beginnings of bringing the humanness back into organizations during these very anxious and demanding times.

We can now measure and assess the life age of employees as an indicator of their energy/capacity to get things done. Now that we have a measure and assessment tool available, organizations should be able to asses the energy/life age of their people and in so doing could have development conversations with people regards their life age/wellbeing/energy/capacity. This allows organizations to overtly recognize wellbeing as a driver of individual performance and include in the performance management equation. In other words performance now equals skills, knowledge, behaviors, experience and WELLBEING. (Source https://www.youngerlives.com/)

As we build wellbeing into development systems within organizations, line managers are required to focus more on supporting the wellbeing of their people, the organization becomes more accountable to providing the necessary resources to enhance the wellbeing of their employees as a driver of performance, and individuals are also now held accountable for their wellbeing.

Holding organizations and individuals accountable for their wellbeing and including wellbeing as a key component of the performance management/development system moves wellbeing from a ‘nice to have’, often stand alone initiative, to an integral part of the performance and development system within a company and therefore will shift behaviors and attitudes towards wellbeing.

Critical to the success of this recommendation (i.e. to include wellbeing in performance and development systems) will be to address the stigma of mental health, as individuals will never trust their line manager to discuss all aspects of their wellbeing if mental ill health is still seen to be a limiting factor to their career progression, as well as all the other ‘stigmatic’ associations to mental ill health e.g. weakness.