

Managing mental health in a post-Covid, hybrid workplace

 By [Michelle Mbss](#)

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The Great Reset, Great Resignation and hybrid working are descriptors for the way workers and the workplace has changed as a result of Covid-19 lockdowns. Terms like this have simplified work issues that are giving rise to a number of mental health challenges - or exacerbating those that existed pre-Covid.



Michelle Mbss, Director: Assessments at SigniumAfrica, and an industrial psychologist

While much of the world appears ready to release the subject of mental health from its “taboo” closet, the value of shedding light on issues means the C-Suite must be prepared to take actions that can boost their company’s productivity.

Issues of mental health can be extremely intimidating for managers, especially as they have to deal with them alongside their normal daily responsibilities. The topic is broad, and to make it manageable, industrial psychology breaks it down into three sectors: Individual, Teams and Organisation.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), while noting that ‘work is good for mental health but a negative working environment can lead to physical and mental health problems’, says that the economic impact of depression and anxiety is significant, estimating their cost to the global economy is \$1tn a year in lost productivity.

This does not include the costs associated with presenteeism, the phenomenon of employees who are at work when they should be, but are not sufficiently productive.

Identifying, education, taking action

As the world redefines work and the workplace, the often overwhelming task of working through mental health issues with employees is vital for companies who understand their human capital constitute their biggest assets.

Managers do not have to navigate this on their own; there are interventions that can take them on a journey from understanding mental health issues to learning how to encourage a culture of psychological safety, and taking the actions required to not only assist colleagues, but work towards mental wellness that give their company a competitive edge.



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To start with, management should know the difference between stress and burnout.

Not all stress is bad. Some top achievers find stress to meet a deadline or be creative is helpful. However, when an employee shows signs of workaholicism, over-engagement in their work and an ongoing sense of urgency about everything, stress becomes an issue.

With burnout, a manager should look for symptoms such as low or no energy; someone disassociating themselves from their job; and reduced professional efficacy.

Here we see physical signs including lack of sleep or too much sleep; emotional indicators such as feeling defeated and hopeless; and behavioural pointers like lashing out, isolating from others and even addictions arising.

These symptoms have been noted fairly extensively after lockdown and with the move to working from home and, more recently, going back to an office people may not feel safe in.

Rebuilding teams and corporate cultures

The response to reducing stress and burn out that may have led to anxiety and depression among employees is psychological safety, defined as “being able to show one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career”.

Where employees are able to share their feelings and be authentic at work, managers must learn to guide conversations in such a way that over-sharing doesn't become part of the culture. It is important to gain an understanding of the parameters the C-Suite may implement to ensure compliance with privacy and legal issues, while encouraging an openness that is healthy for the level of engagement people generally have with their colleagues.



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As a culture of psychological safety becomes ingrained companywide, what should appear is a place of tolerance and realistic expectations.

Where managers are juggling work-from-home staff and back-to-office issues, knowing how to create overall psychological

safety is a valuable skill in the C-Suite's toolbox. Seeing current trends as opportunities to work together towards more effective operations through attitude rather than just more hard work will ultimately show up in a company's bottom line.

In a world that demands agility and the ability to switch tack quickly to attract and retain top talent and to stay financially competitive, corporate culture should be encouraged to evolve to a place where all employees feel valuable to their company while being able to discuss issues that may impede their work in the safety of a company steeped in transparency, trust and an appreciation of these traits in their staff.

ABOUT MICHELLE MOSS

Michelle Moss is a director at SigniumAfrica (previously Talent Africa), a leading South African-based executive search and talent management company servicing sub-Saharan Africa.

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