

# TIME TO PUSH MENTAL HEALTH to the top of the corporate agenda



**H**umans are experiencing a mental shift, and with it, our capacity for empathy and compassion for our family, friends, colleagues, and even bosses has been put to the test. From what I see in my workplace, I can say that we have passed with flying colours... for the most part. We are relating more as feeling, caring people to one another than ever before, but there is a fine line between keeping it together and falling apart when maintaining a work-life balance, especially now that we are working from home.

## Impending mental crisis

US statistics say that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five adults recorded having experienced a mental illness. Worse still, one in 11 reported having a serious mental illness that hampered their everyday life. If nothing else, this tells us that anxiety is playing a bigger role in our lives than we realised, and the way corporates deal with the mental health of their employees will be what makes or breaks our success.

We must acknowledge the realities of this impending mental crisis, and corporates must embrace change in both the way productivity is measured, and in their expectations of employees. More than 100 days into lockdown, I have internalised a few lessons that I believe should be encouraged in the corporate environment.

## Take time off

Things may feel like they are on the knife's edge, but, if you or your business is at that point, think about how your employees must feel. As the economic tsunami threatens to engulf, leaders and managers must remember that happiness and productivity go hand-in-hand. Burnout is deadly, and employees should be encouraged to take time off, particularly in these times of great distress.

## Comfort in routine

I realised, late into the lockdown, that I truly miss traffic. Traffic formed a crucial part of my routine, and I did not realise how dependant I was on it until it was gone. The process of travelling to work helped me switch into work mode, and the time it took me to travel home switched me back into home mode.

I had to consciously form a new routine. Now every morning I wake up, feed the dogs, make coffee, read some news, and check into work around the same time daily. As I encourage my teams to form their own new routines, I also encourage corporate South Africa to do the same, in an attempt to breed some new kind of normality.

## Different perspectives on productivity

The office used to be our equaliser: it did not matter what you had going on in your personal life - to a degree - once you got to work, everyone was largely on the same level and were expected to be equally productive. Now the office is everywhere and nowhere.

Some staff are parents, some live alone, some are spiralling into depression, and some are even forgetting what day of the week it is. Productivity must be measured by the context people find themselves in. Treat it on a case-by-case basis and come to an agreement with each employee. The home office inevitably must make way for the home, one way or another.

## Keep communicating

Lastly, the most obvious thing we must do, is stay in touch. I do not just mean for a daily or weekly status meeting; we need to connect with each other on a humane level. Staying connected to the world and making space for openness and honesty is the only way we're going to cope as we venture into the unknown. Set up structures that allow teams to connect with each other and with you on a personal level.

While we keep our distance, we need to pull together in other ways and make it a habit.



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