

IDEAS

Retailers, suppliers, shoppers, insights



MENTAL HEALTH

Handling stress in pandemic times

In this escalated age of anxiety, here's how to ensure your staff can keep thriving

By Rosalind Stefanac

LIKE IT OR NOT, we're learning to function in pandemic times. But despite the many positive efforts made by retailers to improve the health and safety of their staff, employees are still anxious—and front-line workers like in-store staff are especially so.

To explore the pandemic's ongoing impact in the workplace, human resources technology leader ADP Canada and Angus Reid launched a series of surveys starting in April that revealed 42% of front-line employees felt pressured to go into work during the pandemic (particularly those aged 18 to 34). Furthermore, only 27% of retail/foodservice/hospitality sector employees said they were getting additional mental health resources.

Andrea Wynter, head of human resources at ADP Canada, says the heightened anxiety doesn't surprise her. "In addition to uncertainty around the pandemic itself,

grocery workers are suddenly an essential service," she says. "They can't work at home and they're exposing themselves and putting their families at risk by providing this essential service every day."

Wynter predicts that as the labour market starts to return to normal, employees will be approaching potential job opportunities with a different lens. "Did they [companies] put their employees first during COVID-19 and will they have my best interests at heart is something they'll be thinking about more than ever," she explains. "Those who did will be seen as top-tier employers, even if they're paying less."

Here are some strategies that can help employees feel secure and supported, especially in these unprecedented times.

KEEP ON COMMUNICATING

Even months into the pandemic, staff need and appreciate regular updates, says Wynter. "It's not only about keeping them informed on the situation and the business, but about how you're going to protect them and what will happen if they get sick," she says.

Save-On-Foods established a COVID-19 Task Force, committed to dealing with staff queries. "Management and team members can access either a dedicated COVID-19 telephone line or email address if they have any concerns amid the pandemic," says Heidi Ferriman, vice-president, people & communications. Not only have staff been regularly consulted on how to best enhance their health and safety, she says they've provided valuable feedback as "we worked through updating our existing standard operating procedures and developing new ones."

MAKE MENTAL HEALTH PART OF THE DISCUSSION

In addition to making mental health resources readily available to staff, make talking about mental health a "normal" thing, says Sarah Chamberlin, vice-president marketing and donor experience at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). She says managers and other leaders who are more open and honest about their own experiences can help to normalize conversations around mental health. "It's OK to say, 'today is a tough day and I'm not liking it,' and by sharing that experience, your staff will be more willing to share theirs."

Organizations like CAMH have a wealth of free tools online, including tips on how to talk to front-line staff, including grocery workers.

THINK OUTSIDE THE FRONT LINES

While these are challenging times for staff in grocery stores, pandemic pressures are hitting head office staff pretty hard too, especially those who have been working from home for months on end. According to the ADP Workplace Insights surveys, 27% of remote workers said they were too busy to take breaks and 24% struggle with managing their mental health.

"This is a new reality [of working] for many and means setting up their homes so they can be productive while creating boundaries between work and life," says Liz Volk, chief human resources officer at Longo's. She says the company made sure to survey staff to find out what issues were top of mind and how to make things work better. "Part of that included consistent schedules, getting breaks when they can and taking the time to refresh."

CELEBRATE THE WINS

"Our customers are showing their support by posting signs on our windows, delivering coffee and other treats to the store teams, and making our stores a stop on their vehicle parades in support of essential workers," says Save-On Foods' Ferriman. "We created a page on our internal team member site dedicated to celebrating and sharing these wins and messages of encouragement so that our team members can see how valued they are by their customers and communities."

At Longo's, Volk says there is a similar push to share positive feedback from customers coming in via social media and the customer care centre. "Sharing good news helps people stay positive," she says. The company also provided a financial boost (a \$2 hourly increase to all hourly employees and one week of additional pay for those on salary until the end of June) to reward staff commitment and passion. "Showing appreciation of our teams, especially those who have stuck it out on the front lines, has worked out really well," says Volk.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OUTSIDE RESOURCES

You don't have to do it alone. Lean on the expertise of service partners in your communities and encourage staff to do the same. Save-On Foods' Ferriman says her company's employee assistance program has been a godsend during the pandemic, providing staff and their families with health and wellness resources, including 24/7 counselling support. "We recognized through this pandemic the importance of reminding our team members of the tools and benefits that they have access to," she says. "We also created a new COVID-19 resource page on our team member website giving our teams easy access to any support resources they may need."

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