

News

21.05.19

Culture change is key to improving mental health in the workplace

By Dawn Moore, HR Director at Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure

The 13th-19th May marked this year's Mental Health Awareness Week, an increasingly recognised and important annual event that reflects the need for better understanding of mental health issues across society as well as the support available for those who may be suffering.

While it's heartening to see so many businesses publicly declaring their commitment to mental health related issues, it's vitally important that companies match their words with actions. Showing awareness of the importance of mental health provisions in the workplace is to be applauded, but it's crucial that this is matched by the right management, understanding, behaviours and proactive support. This means knowing how to focus on creating an inclusive, supportive and encouraging workplace rather than one that indicates a culture which could inadvertently lead to the development of stress, depression or other psychological problems.

The construction industry has historically had a reputation for pressurised, difficult physical working conditions and long working hours. In addition, the safety critical nature the work we deliver can often place extra pressure on people which can exacerbate mental health problems if not carefully monitored and mitigated.

Combining the above with a common industry requirement for working away from home and a traditionally male workforce with a stereotypical reluctance to speak about emotional issues, means that there are many factors that could lead to an individual needing help.

In the past decade, the conversation around mental health has changed for the better and there is an increased recognition that businesses have a responsibility to implement working practices and encourage a culture that proactively supports their staff. While ad hoc programmes such as physical wellbeing activities are good starting points and may help staff feel better and unwind for an hour or so, they are no replacement for good management and sustained and well thought out programmes of ongoing support.

Several years ago, Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure kick-started our own journey that has resulted in huge improvements in our working environments up and down the country.

We decided to learn from the experts, and partnered with a range of mental health and wellbeing support providers, such as Mind, the Samaritans and Lighthouse Club, in order to reach our objective of building an inclusive approach to wellbeing throughout the company. We also have taken time to listen to feedback from our employees. From day one we acknowledged this was not something that would be achieved overnight. The process would entail a long-term commitment of time and investment from a wide variety of stakeholders across the business to ensure a consistent understanding of how to create an environment that promotes good mental health and wellbeing was instilled throughout the company.

A great illustration of that commitment is our mental health first aiders. We have over 400 people in the business that are trained to monitor for the signs of mental and emotional distress in colleagues, and to offer assistance if they have concerns. Additionally, we provide awareness

sessions for all employees so they can improve their knowledge of issues such as wellbeing in the workplace and how to foster inclusivity.

This is also supported by a comprehensive health and wellbeing toolkit which provides employees with a number of awareness tools as well as details of how to access many of our other wellbeing support mechanisms if required - such as our employee assistance programme and free counselling.

An undeniably key factor in improving mental health is allowing our employees to develop a healthy work/life balance that enables them to thrive in the workplace while enjoying essential quality time at home.

Against a backdrop of potentially difficult working conditions as described earlier, we have been working hard to positively change our culture and approach to how work is delivered.

We have introduced flexible working, most of which is informal and results from a sensible and open discussion between an employee and their line manager about practical options suited to their particular team/project. As a matter of course, we now examine every role in the company in order to look at how it can be delivered in a way that benefits the individual - this could be working closer to home, or perhaps using technology to work from another site. Not every role lends itself easily to more flexible working, but we encourage our employees to have regular conversations about how rotas and working patterns can be adapted to support the individual's needs.

This approach works, and yields results not only in improving mental health in the workplace but also diversity. Over the past two years, all members of staff have benefited from the changes we've made, which has resulted in figures such as the below:

99% of staff responding to our employee survey last year said that they felt the company saw their health and wellbeing as their number one priority

90% of our employees said that they felt included and respected by their line manager

The number of women in our business has doubled to 21.5%

While there are still improvements to be made, these figures also went some way towards 95% of our employees recommending Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure as an employer. This was confirmed independently as being 'exceptional' when benchmarked against the UK's top 250 companies in all sectors.

Externally, we are immensely proud that we have been recognised with a gold award from Mind this year as part of its Workplace Wellbeing Index, a benchmark of best policy and practice that celebrates the work employers do to promote and support positive mental health. In addition to this, we received the 'Inspiring Change in the Workplace' award at the 2018 Inspiring Change awards in recognition of our work in creating a work environment that values work/life balance and fosters a positive culture, behaviours and ways of working. We were also delighted to win the Best Diversity and Inclusion Initiative award at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) annual People Management Awards for our work in promoting diversity and inclusion at our company and across the industry.

Yet there is no room for complacency and we will continue to examine ways in which we can improve our working culture. The construction industry as a whole is currently at a crucial point in its development, with digital construction and offsite manufacturing set to revolutionise ways of working that have been in place for many years. While such developments will change the future of our industry, their benefits will not be fully realised unless delivered by a workforce in a good

state of mental health. We cannot attract, and retain, a workforce from a diverse range of backgrounds unless policies and practices are implemented that make the construction sector an attractive place to work and until the historically traditional thinking, which still exists in many places, changes.

Our approach over recent years has been to create a supportive working environment that allows our employees to flourish and excel in their jobs while also maintaining a healthy work/life balance. This strategy will remain in a state of permanent evolution, with new initiatives designed to support our existing employees while also attracting new recruits from diverse backgrounds.

I would encourage any company that has not already examined its culture, challenged the way it has always done things or looked proactively at how it can better support the mental health and wellbeing of its current and future employees, to do so. It will improve your company and help to make the industry more attractive overall. The impact won't be felt immediately and any complex issue like wellbeing often means some challenging conversations. However, a happy, healthy, supportive and forward thinking culture can only be good for employees' mental health, the industry as a whole and the communities we operate in.

This article originally appeared on the Safer Highways website