

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The Ad Industry Needs to Address Mental Health Differently

Mindfulness sessions don't do any good if employees don't have time to attend them



The pandemic has prompted more agencies to test out mental health initiatives. Kacy Burdette



By Emmy Liederman

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When screen-fatigued, sleep-deprived employees shrug off pleas from friends and family to take a step back from work, the next logical step is to employ a theatrical cracker to deliver the message.

In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month, Canadian charity Nabs and creative agency Cossette did just that. In a new spot, an

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The single, which includes all-too-honest lines like "You look like shit; have you heard of sleep?/You're falling apart; you're in too deep," is a tongue-in-cheek approach to a serious issue that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic: Workplace culture can devastate employee mental health. What the PSA doesn't delve into is how these structures develop, and why overworking is often not a conscious choice on the part of employees.

According to Mental Health America, 19% of people in the U.S., or 47.1 million people, are living with a mental health condition, an increase of 1.5 million over last year's report. People are suffering more than ever, and the lack of sleep, nutrition and relaxation that accompanies overworking certainly does not help.

"For so long, the culture has been that business is not personal, and that's a huge fallacy," said Susan Birne-Stone, a licensed clinical social worker and therapist. "You can't separate human beings from their work, and if you value your employees, they're going to perform better."

Ad industry professionals are notorious for letting work bleed into their personal lives, and when the pandemic stripped away any semblance of a healthy delineation between work and down time, the mental well-being of employees was put on the back burner. Agencies are testing out initiatives they hope will improve retention and employee morale, like free workout classes, extended time off and meeting-free blocks. But when answering after-hours emails and sending Slack messages on the weekend is rewarded with corporate praise, employees often suffer silently.



While there is no blanket approach to mental health, agencies can work to support their staff on an individual basis while instituting a top-down approach to changing toxic company culture, according to agency insiders. If organizations want to optimize the well-being of their employees, mental health counselors stress that leadership must engage in healthy practices themselves while building trusting relationships with staff, establishing clear work boundaries and addressing burnout before it actually happens. (In a recent survey, Adweek asked marketers to reflect on the state of their mental health, the resources their companies provide and what else they may need from their organizations to improve. Some of their responses are highlighted throughout this piece.)

What changes would you like your organization to make?

We should have quarterly meetings to discuss workplace issues and bias.

Practice what you preach; lead the way in work-life balance and address staffing shortages ASAP.

The intention needs to be shown as a genuine care for its employees and staff, and not a PR stunt to improve the reputation of the organization.

Leading by example

Throughout the pandemic, employers have been more focused on rolling out mental health initiatives, but many have left overworked employees feeling more frustrated—especially when they have to choose between meeting a deadline or attending a mindfulness session.

"I can't stand in front of the agency and tell people to unplug if their direct manager sends emails while they are on vacation," said Laura Proctor, svp and director of talent at agency Doe-Anderson. "We need to practice what we preach."

Carter Weitz, chairman and chief creative officer at agency Bailey Lauerman, shared that his agency's leaders let staff know when they have decided to take a mental health day, which has given the whole staff "permission" to take better care of themselves.

While mental health awareness is becoming increasingly strong, it is still common for people to feel alone in their struggles. According to Karen Doll, a licensed psychologist and consultant, leadership can fight against this tendency by sharing some of their personal struggles with staff.

"I still hear every day that people are afraid to speak up because they don't want their managers to think they can't handle the work," said Doll, adding that corporations have a "real responsibility" to respond to that fear. "Senior leaders have to be able to speak to something in their personal lives," she said. "Whether they say, 'I use this therapy service for my son' or 'I'm struggling and feeling burned out,' the conversation has to come from leadership."



Setting boundaries with clients

In a client-driven business, many agencies fear that taking a step back from work will affect their bottom line. But when Milwaukee-based creative agency Hanson Dodge decided to unplug from work for three days during a week in October, president Stacie Boney said, clients "could not have been more supportive." Most responded to her email immediately, and shared that they wish they could take more time to unplug as well.

While some clients may have learned to expect around-the-clock access to their agencies, it is crucial to differentiate the work that should be prioritized after hours and what can wait until the next work day. Nicole Holland, chief talent officer at Johannes Leonardo, hopes to bring the agency to the point where weekend work is only necessary when it's deemed "mission critical."

Adweek survey answers:

We need to relax the cultural norm of being on-camera in video calls.

My organization has been good at communicating mental health resource but completely failed at identifying what its employees truly need which is plain and simple—relief.

The most helpful thing would be enough staff so we're not spread so thin. All the well-being apps and extra annual leave means nothing if we have too much work to do any of the mental well-being activities!

Ashley Mead, former advertising executive and mental health counselor at Cobbs Psychotherapy, stressed that it is the responsibility of an agency account team to establish "respectful working relationships" with clients.

"While the role of the account team is to translate the needs of the client ... it's also important that they are pushing back on clients who expect work to be done in unreasonable timelines," she said.

Encouraging—instead of just providing—services

For most employees, talking about mental health with their bosses is not a particularly attractive concept. It's hard enough to find the courage to confide in close friends and family, so it is unlikely that a more professional relationship will elicit comfort in a conversation about stepping back for yourself—something that can feel deeply incompatible with the demands of corporate culture.

"Companies mean well and want to offer more services, but it's still not a comfortable thing for people to talk about," said Sasha Martens, president of agency Sasha The Mensch. "A lot of people will just make matters worse by overworking themselves, and it is hard to spot that sometimes."

please let 2021 be the year we stop glorifying 'side hustles.' i'm DONE with feeling i have to prove how cool and ????entrepreneurial???? i am to be seen as adding value to the ad industry. awarding side projects? ugh, setting another bar. mental health and reclaiming our time? yes.

— Robyn Frost (@robynhfrost) [January 4, 2021](#)



Holland understands that approaching supervisors with personal concerns can feel intimidating. As a new hire at Johannes Leonardo, she has gone into the job with the goal of making each employee feel as safe as possible. When staffers feel supported and understood on an individual level, according to Holland, they feel more comfortable advocating for themselves.



"I don't believe in a blanket approach, which is, 'Hey, we have an EAP service. Use it,'" said Holland. "We may have that service, but we have to create an environment where saying you need help feels OK."



Investing in the process



An employee may claim they can handle assignments piling up, but they might not be telling the truth. New York Times bestselling author Gretchen Rubin, who specializes in helping people find happiness, explained this divergence. In Rubin's book *The Four Tendencies*, she lays out the four types she believes characterize people: the obliher, the questioner, the upholder and the rebel. While a questioner may feel perfectly fine admitting they are overwhelmed, such an acknowledgement is not nearly as simple for an obliher. According to Rubin, it's the job of the employer to ensure that tasks are actually being distributed fairly.

Adweek survey answers:

I wish we would make mental health training mandatory for leaders.

I wish my organization provided additional PTO to cover recurring therapy appointments. Most therapists also work in the 9-5 range, so appts have to be during the workday.

The long hours and low pay continue to plague the industry. Salary and job security are very important to standard of living and mental health.

"Are certain tasks falling too heavily on people?" she said. "They may be volunteering to do it, but that doesn't mean it's not work for them. Some people feel that obligation much more heavily, so they tend to be the ones doing it because everyone knows they're the person who goes the extra mile."

Aisha Gordon-Hiles, an accredited counselor and clinical content writer at digital mental health service Kooth, believes personality tests should be viewed as a key resource in both the recruitment and team building processes.

"If you understand the learning and behavior styles of your employees, you can create a culture that works for your team," she said. "The testing also allows employees to be aware of their own needs. If they don't know what their stressors are, they'll have no idea when they've reached their limit."

While it may feel exhausting or trivial to some employees to watch agencies constantly test out new initiatives, Rubin is confident that if workplaces want to create the right culture, they must be willing to engage in some trial and error.

"An employer can set that open tone and say, 'This is something that might work for you, but if it doesn't that's OK, and we're going to keep looking for what works for you,'" she said. "Sometimes just knowing that someone is trying makes people feel better."



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