

Chapter 14

The Role of the Supervisor in Creating and Maintaining an Emotionally Healthy Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Supervisors, be they employed in higher education or in other industries, operate in capacities that allow them to shape organizational cultures within their departments, divisions, colleges, or broader units. Within the higher educational model, this means that supervisors are uniquely placed to counteract negative elements within the culture of academia, which historically has tended to prioritize individual competitive output, with alternative models that may offer improvements to the emotional health and well-being of higher education employees. This chapter seeks to describe the impact of stress on the health of workers, the employment stressors that are unique to higher education, and the processes by which supervisors in higher education can use their positional power to counteract said stressors and improve academic organizational cultures. The chapter includes practical suggestions for supervisors to enhance wellness and decrease emotional harm in scenarios common to the higher education workplace as identified via social media crowdsourcing.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the roles of supervisors in establishing and maintaining humane and emotionally healthy workplaces within the field of higher education. In doing so, the author asserts that supervisors are, by virtue of their positional power, that is to say their formal authority as granted by both title and their place within an organizational structure, in a position to establish and enforce cultural norms for their immediate employees and organizational units, via both formal power structures inherent to their position and the information cascade phenomenon. Given this, supervisors should (and are indeed obligated to) establish and enforce cultural norms that foster humane and emotionally healthy

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work environments that allow employees to maintain a sustainable work/life balance while still meeting organizational needs. Further, supervisors must act mindfully in the workplace, with the full awareness that their choices will be viewed by employees as articulating expectations and norms and may encourage employees to make or avoid similar choices. Put otherwise, supervisors must fully consider that which they celebrate, condemn, and normalize, as these actions may be given unintended weight and could create a culture of expectations that are unhealthy for both individuals and the organization. Additionally, the author asserts that transparency of intentions and expectations, when combined with mindful choices on the part of supervisors, can assist in creating a humane and emotionally healthy culture that does not lionize behaviors and actions that are associated with exhaustion, burnout, and poor work/life balance.

BACKGROUND

The necessity of developing and maintaining emotionally healthy workplaces would seem to be, at first glance, self-evident. It does not take any particularly creative leaps of logic to imagine that healthy, happy workers are more likely to be efficient, productive, and creative than those who are exhausted, overwhelmed, or experiencing burnout. However, despite this seemingly obvious notion that emotionally healthy workplaces are beneficial for both workers and employers, they appear to be increasingly rare. A 2013 study by the American Psychological Association determined that 33% of working Americans reported feeling extreme stress, while 48% of the same pool of respondents indicated that their stress levels had increased in the past five years. A survey conducted in 2017 demonstrated that the uptick in US employee stress levels continued, with 61% of respondents reporting that they felt exhausted and 85% reporting that they felt run down and drained of physical energy (Statista Survey, 2019a, 2019b). More worrying still, despite high rates of stress, burnout, and overwork, 90% of respondents indicated that they felt they were achieving less than they should (Statista Survey, 2019b). This suggests that in addition to the negative emotional impacts generally associated with stress, at least some respondents were also beginning to experience sensations of guilt associated with a perceived lack of progress or industry, which may further exacerbate poor mental and emotional health conditions.

Excessive stress and sustained poor emotional health also impact the body. In his book *Overworked and Overwhelmed: The Mindfulness Alternative*, executive coach Scott Eblin notes a 2014 study by the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine that reported between 60 and 90 percent of visits to the doctor are prompted by stress-related complaints (10). More recently published medical reports, such as those provided by the Mayo Clinic and the Cleveland Clinic, identify a whole suite of physical complaints associated with prolonged stress, including headache, muscle pain, chest pain, depression, anxiety, changes in sex drive, gastrointestinal distress, sleep disturbances, grinding-related tooth damage, weight loss, weight gain, hyperhidrosis, tachycardia, and others (Cleveland Clinic, 2015; Mayo Clinic, 2019; Richards, 2018). Stress management, physical wellness, and emotional wellness are thus necessary priorities for organizations that wish to keep employees both working optimally or, over time, working at all.

Of course, the development of an emotionally healthy and humane work culture involves the participation of many people. Individual efforts must combine with institutional policies and organizational values to ensure the successful prioritization of wellness-friendly behaviors and processes that benefit all employees while still meeting the overall goals of the organization. Within most organizations, whether based in higher education or other industries, those in a supervisory capacity have additional power to

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