

“Managers don’t necessarily have all the answers”

Worry, fear, helplessness – after two years of living with the pandemic, there’s now a war going on in Europe as well. Eike Treis-Hoffmann, Company Doctor and Head of Organizational Psychology in Munich, Germany, gives managers tips on ways to support their employees during these difficult times.



After two years of living with the pandemic, the war in Ukraine looms large. People are consumed with worry and fear. What can managers do to support their teams in times like these?

People respond to threatening situations in many different ways. While some feel the need to talk things through, others prefer to carry on regardless, seeking a sense of normality. Both of those reactions are perfectly okay. And no matter how people react, what really helps them is mindful, friendly interaction. That’s something we need to promote and demand in the area where we work. We also need to live by example.

"The first step is to be available – without forcing a conversation."

What can managers do if they think an employee is finding it difficult to cope?

In times like these, we have to accept that it’s okay if people feel a bit down or sad on occasion. But if you’re worried about someone you work with who seems withdrawn or permanently depressed, then it’s time to act. The first step is to be available – without forcing a conversation. Be ready to speak with anyone who needs to talk and listen carefully to their concerns, keeping in mind that managers don’t necessarily have all the answers. What they can do, though, is refer the person to someone who is able to help them, such as the social counselors and company doctors at DPDHL. If they’re unsure about how to approach the situation, managers can discreetly involve another member of the team who knows the employee well. Another option is to point to external social support services, helplines and crisis management services that can also be accessed.



No ray of hope on the horizon? In times like these, we have to accept that it's okay if people occasionally feel a bit down or sad.

So how do you go about conducting tactful talks?

Managers can express their concerns, describe what they've observed and say they'd like to ask if everything's alright. That they're concerned that the employee might not be doing so well. Or they can explain that they've noticed that the person seems withdrawn. Ask them if that's the case and if they'd like a chance to talk. Managers can ask if they can help, provide support – or if there's anything else that they can do.

In all of this, they should keep an open mind – and not come off as demanding or judgmental. If the person takes up the offer to talk or says that everything's alright, then the manager has to accept it. Although managers have a responsibility to look after employees' well-being, they must always remember that they are dealing with adults. If an employee doesn't want to open up and talk while at work, they don't have to. It's really important that managers leave their employees to take responsibility for themselves. Taking over makes people feel they are helpless, and that's not beneficial when it comes to mental health.

"If an employee doesn't want to open up and talk while at work, they don't have to."

And what if managers are having difficulty coping with the situation themselves? What if they don't feel able to offer and conduct tactful talks.

If as a manager you don't feel able to adequately approach an employee, show interest and be open to listen to their concerns, then you should delegate or refer the person elsewhere. You can refer the employee to a professional instance such as a company doctor or, as already mentioned, to a suitable member of the team. Anyone who's having difficulty dealing with the situation or isn't able to – for whatever reason – conduct a conversation with calmness, take time and show the kind of empathy needed, shouldn't attempt it at all. A quick chat in the corridor or with someone who isn't receptive won't have the desired effect. Managers aren't counselors and no one expects them to be. When it comes down to it, they also have a responsibility to look after themselves. In times of uncertainty, self-care is a crucial resilience builder. Pay attention to yourself and to your needs. Look for people in your immediate environment that you can talk to in confidence, who will be there for you and with whom you feel able to let down your guard at times. Don't neglect the opportunity to find balance outside of work by exercising, going to the movie theater or simply having fun. It's important, even if the crisis and day-to-day business are especially demanding right now. In times like these, strong and healthy leaders are needed more than ever before.



Turbulent times: Even small activities can help you look forward to a better tomorrow.

Unlike in the pandemic, this current fear is coupled with a sense of helplessness, and even powerlessness. How can managers help people cope with it all?

Man-made catastrophes like war are far more difficult to cope with than natural disasters. Especially if we feel there's nothing we can do to alleviate the suffering that we believe could be prevented. Basically, the first step is to shake off the sense of powerlessness and adopt a more proactive stance. Some do it by supporting a good cause. They need to feel that they can make a difference. As a leader, you could provide an incentive – suggest a joint GVD activity on behalf of refugee aid or some other charitable project. Of course, there are others who seek distraction, preferring to get together with friends for drinks or even a barbecue. And that's totally fine too – having a good time together is extremely important. Just ask your team what they need. A joint activity (pandemic permitting) will help them overcome their feelings of helplessness – at least for the time being.

"It's okay to be happy, even during times like these."

But how can we stay positive during these uncertain times? Can we really express optimism while people are suffering elsewhere?

We have to seek optimism and hope in the little things we can be thankful for. For me, that means thinking: "What a blessing it is to know that my peace won't be disturbed by air raid sirens and I can get a good night's sleep." In some cases we are only now becoming aware of the value of things we usually take for granted. Plus, it's okay to be happy, even during times like these. Suffering isn't diminished by more sadness, fear and stress in the world. Quite the opposite, in fact: Sharing happiness connects people; it fosters understanding and peace on a small scale. No one benefits from my doom and gloom. If I've found inner peace, if I allow myself to be thankful for the things I have, it gives me renewed energy and an air of calm. That helps me to cope far better with the sense of threat I feel. If we feel good, then we're more receptive. We're better able to listen and help. Anger and aggression don't promote peace. We need openness, tolerance, and dialog.



Brighter days ahead: Enjoying the good times helps us find inner peace.

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