ACADEMIA | Letters

Application of Psychological Flexibility Model to Address Mental Health in Higher Education

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A considerable amount of research in recent decades has been dedicated to stress and burn out of faculty in higher education settings (Blackburn & Bentley, 1993; Catano, V., Francis L., Haines T., Kirpalani, H., Shannon H., Stringer, B., & Lozanksi, L., 2007). Some contribute faculty work stress to lack of time to complete existing professional demands, such as production of scholarly work, teaching, advising, and service. Berg and Seeber (2013) propose that higher education organizations have amplified the stress by assimilating a corporate business model that downplays faculty's need for time to produce scholarship and pedagogy in favor of attaining financially pleasing outcomes (Berg & Seeber, 2013; Côté, J. E. and Allahar, A., 2011).

Although it may be true that business corporations are highly focused on fast pace and competitive race- to- the- top approach at the expense of drowning individual growth and self- efficacy, there is much that higher education organizations can learn from the corporate world in the area of developing programs to address employee well- being, mental health, and burn out. Many large- scale successful business corporations, such as Google, have developed employee wellness plans that include employee health benefits with affordable co-pays for mental health services, compassionate listening, and built-in workday breaks with opportunities for yoga, meditation, and mindfulness practice. Transparency about mental health and struggles related to work stress is also encouraged and protected. Kelly Greenwood, the founder of Mind Share Partners, a national non- profit with a mission to improve mental health in a workplace, describes mental health as the next frontier in supporting movement to ensure diversity and inclusion in a work settings (Arrons- Mele, 2019). She defines a healthy workplace as an environment of psychological safety and real understanding of how day-to-day practices influence mental health. An organization striving to support its employees' mental

health embraces a process of equipping and empowering managers with skills in how to react to struggling employees (Arrons- Mele, 2019).

Research on prevalence of mental health challenges and stigma in the workplace setting is limited (Mind Share Partners' Mental Health Report, 2019). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 1 in 5 Americans copes with a mental health condition and up to 80% of people will manage a mental health condition in their lifetime. Due to persistent stigma, most employees do not disclose their mental health condition to their managers or colleagues; in fact 95% of employees who have taken time off due to stress, reported another cause for their absence, such as an upset stomach or a headache. The annual costs of unsupported and untreated mental health conditions and stigma in a workplace reach $16.8 billion in lost employee productivity (Mental Health at Work Report, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has padlocked economies around the world and affected education systems in most countries. Now more than ever, institutions of higher education need to figure out ways to be flexible and to alter existing operations in order to support university and college faculty at both professional and personal levels. Variables that contribute to a supportive workplace such as encouragement of self-compassion, open-mindedness, non-judgment, trust, transparency, and flexibility, need to be recognized as prerequisites to effective command and appreciation of challenges related to change. Behavioral science can offer powerful strategies that managers in higher education organizations can adopt to help their employees at both macro and individual levels.

Psychological flexibility is a model that can offer useful strategies to promote flexible and healthy behavior in higher education workplace (Moran, 2015). It is a behavioral science approach that describes an extensive range of human abilities needed for adaptation to various situational stresses such as those brought about by the pandemic in the year 2020. Psychological flexibility provides a model for shifting attitudes and behavioral repertoires when unproductive strategies compromise private and social functioning. It encourages the person to uphold balance among important life domains and be mindful, open, and committed to behaviors that are compatible with deeply held values (Kashdan, 2010). A meta-analysis of 32 studies found that the psychological flexibility construct was associated with outcomes ranging from effective job performance to overall life satisfaction (Hayes et al., 2006). The behavioral repertoire of psychological flexibility involves six elements: 1) present moment awareness, 2) acceptance of difficult experiences, 3) defusion from unworkable thoughts, 4) perspective taking with respect to self and others, 5) values identification and clarification, and 6) committed action (Hayes, 2006).

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Present Moment.

In context of a work place, present moment awareness, sometimes referred to as mindfulness, is in its simplest form an act of judgement- free concentration on task. The rise of scholarly interest in mindfulness has produced multiple lines of research related to inquiry about its benefits in the workplace. Researchers found that mindfulness permits people to view events more objectively and dispassionately (Shapiro, Astin, & Freedman, B., 2006) and allows them to adjust their thoughts, emotions, and physiological reactions more effectively (Lakey, Campbell, Brown, and Goodie, 2007; Papies, Barsalou, & Custers, 2012). Other research examines the effects of mindfulness on task performance and shows that mindfulness correlates positively with accuracy of judgment (Kiken and Shook, 2011), insight-related problem solving (Ostafin and Kassman, 2012), and academic performance (Shao and Skarlicki, 2009). Moore and Malinowski (2009) found that mindfulness practice enhances mental flexibility and promotes executive functioning (Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, and Goolkasian, 2010) which are all qualities central to effective performance across a range of work tasks. For organizations concerned with employee's on-task behaviors, especially during challenging times like those of the pandemic, facilitating mindfulness practice is an endeavor well worth investment at the administrative level.

Acceptance.

Universities can be stressful environments and interpersonal conflict, deadlines, and scarcity of time are often unavoidable realities (Berg & Seeber, 2013). In the psychological flexibility model, the act of *acceptance* is about the willingness to experience a range of psychological events no matter how distressing they are. Biron and van Veldhoven (2012) found that making room for difficult experiences and facing them instead of actively distracting from them, significantly increased employee productivity. The act of acceptance leads to a useful habituation to feelings of discomfort, such as frustration, sadness, disappointment, imposter, or failure, and research indicates that the more prolonged the exposure to unpleasant and aversive experiences, the less unpleasant and aversive those experiences become (Benito and Walther, 2015). Faculty may shy away from transparency and disclosure related to uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, or experiences in fear of becoming undesirably vulnerable to others' judgements or crossing professional boundaries (Berg & Seeber, 2013). However, in the past few decades data on importance of vulnerability in a workplace have grown extensively (Jenkins, 2021). If skillfully executed, openness to experience and acceptance of personal vulnerabilities do not have to necessarily blur boundaries and create problems; Rather, they may strengthen the individual's personal and professional confidence and psychological stamina (Laloux, 2014).

The ability to accept these experiences is another skill that higher education organizations can cultivate in order to make their employees more resilient and productive.

Defusion.

The defusion element of the psychological flexibility is an ability to observe one's thoughts without allowing those thoughts to dominate one's overt behavior. It is impossible to always reign in one's thoughts, especially in taxing work environments; therefore, such environments are likely to provoke unproductive thoughts. When defusing from mental rules about how things *should* and *should not* be, an individual engages in flexible thinking and is able to let go of rigid behavior routines that are interrupted by unpredictable events.An academic workplace, often characterized by long- standing adherence to traditions and status quo, can easily lead to rigidity around policies and procedures with chaos and distress ensuing upon any slight call to change. Employees, who can defuse from prescriptive routines, can think more flexibly and compassionately about themselves and make room for action that effectively moves them toward completion of their work tasks.

Perspective taking.

Perspective taking, whether at work, home, grocery store, doctor's office, or on a social media platform, is critical to prosocial and successful interactions with others. Perspective taking in the workplace, similar to defusion, allows one to let go of assumptions about others (Moran & Ming, 2020). This is especially helpful when assumptions or judgments are those of criticism and attribution of blame. Perspective taking does not only apply to an ability to empathize, sympathize, and attempt to see others' point of view; it also embraces how an individual views oneself and is able to detach from rigid images of who they represent. Under stress of meeting a deadline, pursuing tenure or promotion, or ensuring positive student evaluations, faculty may unintentionally get caught up in their own opinions and judgements that then get in a way of working collegially alongside of others. Faculty meetings can be a display of highly opinionated arguments with very little to no reciprocated active listening. Laloux (2014) suggests that perspective taking is often replaced with ego- driven behavior, something that can not only destroy relationship with others but also lead to failure in achieving one's professional goals. In order for faculty to safely show up as whole individuals and avoid using the ego as a mechanism to protect from stress and demands of a workplace, higher education organizations should promote practices that reward flexible perspective taking and compassion for self and others.

Values.

Values refer to selected guidelines for behavior that allow an individual to engage in personally-relevant actions that may not always be immediately gratifying. (Moran, 2015). Everyday tasks can be tedious and aversive; the context in which they are executed may require uncomfortable interactions with coworkers, tough conversations with the boss, and frustration with lack of time and other resources. An individual can overcome apprehension surrounding these tasks by clarifying the values in service of which these tasks are performed. For example, when a coworker asks for assistance with a tough project, one can agree to help and then go on to privately grumble about it; alternatively, one can engage in value clarification and remind themselves that they truly cherish being a valuable colleague thus making it much more bearable and even satisfying to invest time in helping another. Higher education administrators typically orient faculty and staff toward department and university mission and vision statements that are constructed based on values, but the process of arriving at an agreed-upon standard requires continuous effort to ensure that everyone receives an opportunity to express not only the organizational values, but also their personal ones.

Committed Action.

The final element of the psychological flexibility is committed action, which calls for employees' behaviors to match key performance indicators for the organization's objectives (Moran, 2015). Where the other previously mentioned elements of psychological flexibility capitalize on the individual's strengths to support the group, committed action requires accountability and a pledge to follow-through on an individual level. It is not enough for employees to reflect in safe spaces, share their vulnerabilities, and show compassion for those who struggle. In the end, there is an expectation of accomplishing the organization's mission. Supporting faculty's mental health is about not only the soft approach and kindness, but it also requires everyone to be accountable for their actions and for using resources to achieve the collective goals. Faculty's accountability for actions can be strengthened in the work place with soft skills such as vulnerability that leaders can encourage and model for their employees. In words of Courtney Lynch, "Leaders inspire accountability through their ability to accept responsibility before they place blame" (Morgan, Lynch, & Lynch, 2017).

Conclusion

Higher Education organizations carry a reputation of organized hierarchies (Stevens and Williams, 1988) but they also engage in many practices that are compatible with models like the psycho-

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logical flexibility model. The push and pull, often characteristic of government operations, also results in a dynamic that can be useful and supportive of employees' personal growth and creativity. The transformation into a more flexible and wholesome model does not happen overnight and it does not have to involve a total change of practice. Laloux (2014) describes a possibility for an adoption of selected practices- those that the majority of employees are likely to value. The first step in the process is a much-needed research to determine usefulness of the psychological flexibility in higher education settings. There is enough conceptual support to encourage such research.

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