

Anxiety at Work

What's in it for me? Take stress out of the office.

In recent years, mental health has become a topic of conversation. And people are speaking out about their own mental wellness more than ever. In these blinks, you'll learn how businesses and people managers can become part of this conversation. Packed with simple techniques to help team leaders identify the causes and triggers of anxiety in the workplace, this is your go-to guide for understanding how the modern working world is affecting our mental health. You'll also discover simple yet effective techniques for troubleshooting anxiety so that your employees are as stress-free as possible – and more productive as a result. In these blinks, you'll learn

why firefighters who eat lunch together save more lives; why millennials are often called “generation paranoia”; and how you can be an ally to employees from minority backgrounds.

Younger workers are feeling besieged by events beyond their control.

How do you respond to uncertainty? Like many of us, you probably feel anxious when you don't know what the future holds. For today's workforce, this has become a big problem because the modern workplace is full of the unknown. The key is for leaders to try and minimize uncertainty where they can – and help their employees cope when they can't. So what's the cause of this uncertainty? It all comes down to job insecurity. Nearly two-thirds of American workers report being concerned about the future of their jobs. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has destabilized many jobs, but these fears have their roots in earlier events, too. The younger generation is still affected by the financial crisis of 2008, as well as the prospect of robots and automation taking over their roles. The key message here is: Younger workers feel besieged by events beyond their control. Sadly, a lot of millennial workers also feel exploited. They've funded their own education and qualifications, typically accruing student debt in the process. But even after doing all of this, their reward is often insecure, freelance, or contract-based work. Why? Because this is the labor arrangement that works best for the capital-owning bosses. As a result, millennials feel replaceable at any time. This uncomfortable reality leads to predictably high anxiety levels. Some social commentators have even christened millennials as “Generation Paranoia.” Younger workers are constantly looking over their shoulders at the competition and feel forced to work harder and longer than ever before. This is the real reason why workers feel the need to be “always on” and always available. How can leaders help to reduce their employees' anxiety levels, and the uncertainty that drives it? Well, in many cases, they can do nothing about the uncertainty. The exciting, yet challenging reality is that, across almost every industry, disruption is happening at breakneck speed. So change and uncertainty are here to stay. But leaders aren't completely helpless; they can still help their teams navigate this uncertainty. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, optometrist firm FYidoctors was forced to close almost all its clinics. This threw its entire workforce into panic and disarray. But the senior leadership team was determined to be transparent about what was happening. During daily briefing sessions over Zoom, the leadership

team told their staff about any new changes and issues that had occurred, and what they were planning to do about them. In time, the mood in the company changed from panic and confusion to mutual understanding, and everyone in the company felt a lot less anxious.

Some conflict is necessary for a thriving and productive team.

How comfortable are you with disagreeing with someone? Perhaps you're comfortable putting yourself in opposition to a friend or a loved one, but when it comes to the workplace, you shy away from it. The prospect of engaging in conflict with your teammates, or your boss, might make you highly anxious. But, there's a big difference between healthy debate and unhealthy hostility in the office. One common complaint that managers have is that their employees are too conflict-averse. They shy away from having difficult conversations and become distressed when they're given tough feedback. Unsurprisingly, this is a source of frustration to managers. The key message here is: Some conflict is necessary for a thriving and productive team. Disagreement and debate among members of the highest-performing teams is common. This conflict drives better problem-solving and can actually motivate staff to produce better work. Why? Well, when people know that their voices are being heard, they feel more engaged and secure and have a greater sense of ownership over work projects. After all, you're more likely to own and care about something when you feel you've had a say in it. So how can leaders encourage healthy debate within their teams? The first step is to encourage discussions in meetings. It's not uncommon for some team members to refrain from sharing their views. This inevitably means that just a few, more conflict-comfortable people, are listened to. One way around this issue is to take a few minutes at the end of each meeting to ask each person directly what their thoughts are. This encourages people to leave their comfort zones and share their true thoughts. Of course, this only works if team members feel psychologically safe in sharing their opinions. To give people this sense of safety, managers should emphasize the importance of everyone giving their honest opinion at all times. Although sugar-coating one's opinions may seem like the best option, it's actually detrimental to the whole organization. Both individuals and groups function best when they have the right information on which to base their decisions. When someone holds back their true opinions, then they're actually withholding information that could help others come to better decisions. Of course, there are good and bad ways to debate. Managers can encourage a better quality of debate by encouraging employees to support their arguments with facts, whenever they express disagreement.

Leaders must have brave conversations about discrimination and systemic bias.

Not all workplace anxiety is the same, and sadly, some of us feel anxious because of who we are. We're now talking about the psychological distress that marginalized groups may feel at work. These groups include, but aren't limited to, ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and those affected by disability. Some leaders still refuse to believe that bias affects people at work. They think that saying otherwise is simply a case of political correctness. But the evidence is clear; some people have been

historically treated differently, and have suffered as a result. The key message here is: Leaders must have brave conversations about discrimination and systemic bias. Change is well overdue. Studies show that, in the United States, Black people are 20 percent more likely to be affected by severe mental health problems than any other group. Yet, despite this, Black adults are also less likely to receive help and treatment than the average American. Experts believe that part of the reason why Black people are affected disproportionately by mental health problems, is because of the racism and injustices they face in their daily environments; these environments include the workplace. Similarly, LGBTQ+ people experience rates of anxiety and depression that are over twice as high as their heterosexual peers. So how can leaders become allies in the fight against discrimination and bias in the workplace? First, it's important to follow up on all complaints in a timely manner, even the ones which appear to be minor. Second, leaders should foster an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing their true selves. Of course, this is easier said than done, and many people don't feel able to bring their whole self to work. But leaders can help promote a more authentic environment by sharing more about themselves, and modeling authenticity, so that others start to feel able to do the same. Finally, many managers might experience the urge to do as Howard Schultz, the former CEO of Starbucks, did during a company town hall meeting in 2019. As Starbucks faced accusations of racial bias, Schultz declared that he simply didn't "see color." Although it may be tempting to try to prove one's unprejudiced attitude like this, it's also a bad idea. After all, just because you might not "see" someone's color or sexual orientation, doesn't make this part of their identity any less real, and it doesn't reduce the discrimination they may face as a result of it.

Members of effective teams feel a powerful sense of belonging.

Have you ever experienced the crushing feeling of being left out? Perhaps other people went to a party, but your invite never arrived. Often, these feelings of exclusion are associated with the schoolyard, but you can feel left out as an adult, too, even in the workplace. Evidence suggests that, when workers feel like a cohesive group, they're actually much more effective at their jobs. So when employees feel excluded by their teammates, it's not just a problem for the individual, but for the company as well. The key message here is: Members of effective teams feel a powerful sense of belonging. For example, research by Cornell University found that fire stations in which firefighters eat their lunch together save more lives than the stations in which firefighters eat by themselves. Tellingly, when researchers asked the firefighters who ate alone and why, the firefighters quickly became embarrassed. Why? Because they knew that something deeper was wrong with the way their team was operating. Unfortunately, many of us have had the experience of being left out at work. In a study by the University of British Columbia, 71 percent of professionals reported feeling excluded by their teammates in some way. This is a big issue for mental health because exclusion contributes to anxiety, as well as reduced productivity. So how can managers ensure that everyone on their team feels included? The reality is that this can be challenging. After all, exclusion is typically something that isn't happening; coworkers aren't returning someone's phone calls or inviting that person to join them for lunch. It's much harder to spot something that's not taking place than something that is. One of the best ways around this problem is to use regular one-to-one catch-up sessions to ask team members how they're getting along with the rest of the team. It can be as

simple as adopting a routine known as the ten-ten. This is a morning and afternoon ritual that takes place when leaders first get into work and last thing before they leave. The ten-ten involves walking around their team's office, with the goal of saying hello to everyone, and asking them how they're doing. This makes everyone feel as if they belong to the team, satisfying their innate need as human beings to feel like a valued part of something bigger. Another way that leaders can promote inclusion is to implement a buddy system. This is where senior staff members mentor and socialize with junior staff.

Our cult of overwork is leading to burnout and lost productivity.

Your job security might be uncertain, but in the modern workplace, there's one thing most of us can be sure of: having too much work. Bosses are placing greater demands on their employees and expecting them to do more in an ever-shrinking timeframe. But all these expectations are pushing workers over the edge. In a 2019 survey, a shocking 91 percent of American employees reported feeling burned-out at some point during the previous year. When you're burned-out, you feel either physically or emotionally exhausted. You might start feeling cynical about your work and the people you work with; you may feel irritable, or even start to dislike yourself for putting up with other people's unreasonable demands. The key message here is: Our cult of overwork is leading to burnout and lost productivity. Burnout isn't just bad for the individual, it's also terrible news for their employer. Not only do burned-out employees take over 60 percent more sick days every year than average, but they're also more than twice as likely to leave their firm for a different company. With this in mind, many organizations are starting to pay attention to the risks of employee burnout. Unfortunately, they're going about it in the wrong way. How? By focusing on the symptoms, not the root cause of the problem. Many employers promote staff well-being schemes such as relaxation courses, healthy eating initiatives, and time-management guidance. Other approaches include resilience training, in the hope that workers can be made more resilient to burnout. But all these strategies overlook the real problem, which is that many of today's workers simply have too much on their plate. No amount of yoga is going to fix that. As for resilience, one of the industries with the highest burnout rate is the health-care industry. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, health-care workers are actually incredibly resilient and effective under pressure. Yet, they're still suffering from burnout, so resilience training probably isn't going to change very much. So what can companies do to tackle burnout? Well, they could start with reducing their employees' workload. Many leaders complain that this is impossible, but it can be done. Health-care professionals, for instance, are overly burdened by bureaucracy. Every time they see a patient, they spend valuable time filling in forms and ticking boxes. Many health-care companies have found that, by simply reducing their employees' digital workload, or reassigning form-filling to people on the team who actually enjoy these kinds of tasks, staff feel less anxious, and far less overwhelmed.

Millennial workers fear missing out on better job opportunities.

Have you experienced FOMO; the fear of missing out? Perhaps you've scrolled through

social media and worried that your friends all seem to be having more fun, and living a better life than you? If so then you're not alone. Millions of young Americans are feeling exactly the same, and are feeling anxious as a result. And it's not just fun and parties that we feel we're going to miss out on. For younger generations in particular, it's also the big things; things like getting a good job, progressing in a career, or even getting a mortgage. What's the cause of all this FOMO? It all comes down to job insecurity. The key message here is: Millennial workers fear missing out on better job opportunities. Stuck in freelance and contract-based work, many workers feel much more disposable than their parents' generation did. As a result, these younger generations often make a preemptive jump to a different company. Fearing that they're missing out on better opportunities elsewhere, they move between jobs at breakneck speed. For instance, 40 percent of baby boomers report staying with their company for over 20 years or more. Over three-quarters of Gen Zers say they only plan to stay with their employer for two years, before moving on. What is it that younger workers are so restlessly seeking? Well, 87 percent of younger workers say they're looking for learning and development opportunities that'll allow them to develop their careers. Sadly, they don't often find it. Research conducted by global insights company CEB, has shown that only one in ten organizations has a culture of learning and development. But this gap in employee expectations and reality also presents an opportunity for employers. Specifically, organizations can ease their younger workers' anxiety around career progression, and reduce turnover rates, by implementing development initiatives for their employees. This could include traditional training programs that are offered to all staff. It could also mean more creative initiatives, such as offering a fast route to promotion. For instance, Ladders, a US based recruitment firm, offers its junior staff a promotion, including a change in pay grade and job title, every four months. To achieve these mini-promotions, staff must achieve specific learning objectives. Not only does this scheme boost employee engagement, it also makes the company more successful. This isn't that surprising, when you consider that companies that facilitate employee learning and development are nearly a third more likely to be leaders in their industry.

Perfectionist traits are becoming more prevalent among young people.

Do you have any perfectionist traits? Do you hold yourself, or others, to impossibly high standards? Are you very self-critical, or operate with an all-or-nothing mindset? If you recognize any of this in your own behavior, then you might be causing yourself unnecessary anxiety at work. While some professions, such as being an airline pilot or a medical technician, require extreme accuracy and attention to detail, perfectionism isn't exactly about being accurate or highly meticulous in your tasks. Actually, perfectionism is usually about seeming to be perfect. In many cases, perfectionists feel an overwhelming sense of judgment from the people around them, and constantly try to live up to what they perceive to be others' expectations. This might sound like a good thing, and it's true that perfectionists tend to be more motivated and conscientious. But perfectionism also has big downsides. Not only do perfectionists tend to be inflexible, but they also, ironically, may give up on difficult tasks more easily. Why? Because if they know they can't do something perfectly, they may not be interested in even trying. The key message here is: Perfectionist traits are becoming more prevalent among young people. A 2017 study by the University of Bath that looked at British, American, and Canadian college students, found that perfectionist traits were much more common than in previous generations. The cause of this may be social media. After all, it's now

easier than ever to compare ourselves to others, and the pressure to reach the unattainable standards presented online can be intense. So what can companies do to stop perfectionism becoming a source of anxiety among their employees, and particularly among younger team members? The answer is surprisingly simple: let your employees know what good enough looks like. Problems can arise if staff never receive positive feedback on work that's of an acceptable standard. Instead, feedback is only received when something isn't good enough. This means that employees struggle to recognize where the boundaries lie, and don't know how much effort to put into a piece of work. This is anxiety-inducing for all, but especially for perfectionists, who are overly fearful of being harshly judged. So bosses need to be generous with their praise, even when the quality of the work isn't spectacular. It's also a good idea for bosses to learn how perfectionism presents itself in the workplace, so that they can identify the people that might need extra reassurance. You can usually spot perfectionists by looking at who is asking for a lot of guidance on projects, as perfectionists tend to ask for a lot more. If someone also struggles to take risks, however small, and gets very defensive when criticized, there's also a high chance that the person is a perfectionist.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: New generations of workers are facing challenges that their parents' generation didn't; the labor market has rarely been as insecure and tumultuous as it is right now. This brave new world of work has left many employees feeling uncertain, restless, and racked with anxiety. However, with a little empathy, employers can ease this anxiety and help younger workers feel that they're valued and on the right track to career success. And here's some more actionable advice: Don't forget to praise your star performers. However busy you are as a manager, you should always take time to express your gratitude for a job well done. As counterintuitive as it might sound, the team members who tend to receive the most time and attention from their manager are often the ones who are failing. Managers are so busy trying to performance manage the weakest people in the team, that the strongest receive precious little feedback at all. Ironically, this can lead to star performers feeling anxious about this radio silence and make them worry that their work isn't good enough.