Addressing mental health, burnout in the workplace

AS A SOCIETY, we witnessed workers grapple with the strains of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID -19) pandemic, experienced the mental stresses of social isolation, and struggled to achieve work-life balance while working remotely — all of which has taken an enormous toll on our "mental health." But do we know what this elusive buzzword means? Mental health goes beyond the absence of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Mental health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), refers to an overall state of well-being where an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and is able to work productively and contribute to their community. Anyone could suffer from poor mental health at some point in their lives. However, it isn't easy to identify those struggling with mental health issues, as it is a "silent killer" according to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Realistically, it could take years before people feel comfortable opening up about their mental health struggles, and by then, it could be too late.

Just because mental health issues are invisible, does not mean they do not exist. Globally, nearly 1 billion people have mental health issues and it's reported that people with serious mental conditions die two decades earlier than those without mental illness. According to the WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health survey in early 2020, at least 3.6 Filipinos suffer from one type of mental, neurological, or substance use disorder.

Yet, mental health remains a topic that is poorly understood. For many people, this is still a hard topic to talk about. People from different demographics, ethnicities, and countries have varying attitudes towards mental health. Poor mental health tends to be taken as a sign of weakness; therefore, some people disregard mental health issues, whilst others deny their existence altogether. Due to the social stigma and costs that surround the topic of mental disorders, most of the people that suffer from mental health issues do not receive treatment. Without proper treatment, people are forced to deal with these issues alone, leading them further into a vicious cycle of stress and despair. As coworkers, employers, and leaders, it is imperative for us to appreciate and value people for who they are and to be sensitive to what they are going through daily. No one should struggle with mental health alone.

GAINING A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

While the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the global mental health crisis, with close to onethird of Asia Pacific's remote workers admitting that the pandemic has increased burnout at work, employers must recognize that mental health issues have always been prevalent at the workplace. Currently, people are constantly working at breakneck speeds to meet ever-present deadlines, and some even take leave to do more work. To make matters worse, there is a lack of transparency with regards to communicating these issues in the workplace. For instance, 63% of employees do not feel comfortable revealing to their coworkers that they took time off work because of mental health issues. As a resu...

there is a lack of awareness about the mental health battle that workers have been facing for years.

There is no doubt that it is challenging to consistently promote a healthy working environment, especially as we enter the post-pandemic world and companies are striving to play catch-up due to the perception of lost time owing to the pandemic. It seems almost counter-intuitive to suggest taking a step back to gain a fresh perspective. Yet, that is exactly what we need to do. By reflecting on the most important things 2020 has taught us, we should realize that amidst the uncertainty of this year, our coworkers have weathered the storm with us. They have been challenged, stretched, and tested like never before, and have come out of the pandemic with a newfound resilience and stoicism. Without their collective grit, businesses would not have survived the pandemic. Hence, the bottom line is that people should always come first. This mentality allows us to safeguard the happiness, health, and mental well-being of our employees, and gives us the ability to pave the way to build a better future of work. It's not only the right thing to do, but it's the smart thing to do. A