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Mental health concern or performance issue?

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IN today's rapidly evolving workplace, leaders are increasingly expected to be attuned not only to the productivity of their team but also to their wellbeing. As mental health becomes a central focus in organizational culture, distinguishing between performance issues rooted in work-related challenges and those stemming from mental health concerns is critical. There are employees who take advantage of the ambiguity by passing off incompetence for mental health concerns. Leaders need to be equipped with the ability to identify when someone is struggling due to personal challenges, or when there may be a lack of knowledge, skills gap, or behavioral problem.

One way managers can handle this delicate task is by looking for patterns, not isolated incidents. A single missed deadline or reduced output may result from various factors like a heavy workload or personal conflict. However, if such behavior becomes consistent and deviates from an employee's usual performance, it warrants further investigation. Signs of concern include increased absenteeism, social withdrawal, a drop in enthusiasm, or difficulty focusing. While performance issues may show similar patterns, they usually stem from job-specific tasks or skills.

All employees experience stress at some point, but how they handle that stress can provide clues about the root cause. When facing excessive work-related stress, most employees can articulate the specific challenges they are facing, such as deadlines or workload. Mental health concerns, on the other hand, may manifest as disproportionate stress responses to even routine tasks. An employee who suddenly feels overwhelmed by day-to-day responsibilities or shows visible signs of anxiety when previously they were confident might be experiencing more than just work stress. People managers can help by regularly checking in with employees about their workload, encouraging open communication, and creating an environment where stress management is part of the conversation.

You also need to consider personal and behavioral changes. Behavioral changes can provide insight into whether an employee is facing mental health challenges. If someone who was once social and engaged suddenly becomes withdrawn, isolated, or uncommunicative, it could be a red flag. Mental health concerns often manifest in changes to behavior and demeanor. On the other hand, performance issues tend to be more task-specific and less about overall mood or attitude. For instance, an employee might still engage socially but struggle with executing specific job responsibilities. In such cases, the issue may be skill gaps, lack of training, or other workplace factors.

One of the most effective ways to differentiate between mental health concerns and performance issues is by fostering an environment where employees feel safe to share their struggles. If a leader notices a change in an employee's performance or behavior, it is crucial to have a private, compassionate conversation. The aim of this discussion is not to diagnose mental health conditions but to create a space where the employee can share if they are facing personal challenges. Open-ended questions such as "I have noticed a change in your performance lately, is there anything going on that I can support you with?" help draw out team member's feelings and help you identify their issues. Sometimes, the team members will be upfront about their mental health struggles, and other times they may simply need feedback, clarity, or training on performance-related matters. But you would not know if you do not ask.

If you suspect that an employee's performance is being affected by mental health concerns, it is important to involve Human Resources or a professional resource. HR can guide managers in adhering to company policies and ensure that the employee receives appropriate support. This could involve offering the employee access to mental health services, adjusting work expectations temporarily, or ensuring they have time to address their mental health needs. Mental health concerns are often sensitive, so it is critical that confidentiality and care are observed when approaching HR for assistance.

It is important to note that mental health concerns and performance issues are not always separate. Mental health challenges can directly affect an employee's ability to perform their job effectively. Anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions may hinder an employee's focus, motivation, or decision-making skills. As such, people managers need to address both the performance issue and the underlying cause simultaneously. For example, if an employee's anxiety is causing them to miss deadlines, a solution might involve both time management support and providing access to mental health resources.

An effective people manager needs to balance productivity with empathy. Differentiating between performance issues and mental health concerns is a delicate process that requires keen observation, open communication, and an understanding of human behavior. By fostering an environment of support, leaders can ensure their teams remain both mentally healthy and high-performing. In doing so, they build not only a more compassionate workplace but a more resilient one.