

3 ways small business owners can support employee mental health

By [Ben Bierman](#), issued by [Business Partners Limited](#) 24 Oct 2023

The pandemic years brought issues of mental health in the workplace to the forefront. For many South African employees, the pressures associated with making an unexpected but seamless transition to remote working proved taxing, with many employees struggling to regulate their schedules and maintain a work-life balance.



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Years later the dust created by Covid-19 is finally beginning to settle. However, many employees still find themselves battling high levels of stress, as well as conditions such as anxiety and depression. In a small business, these feelings can be compounded by the fast pace of work and the demands of being part of a team that is responsible for keeping a business afloat.

To counteract this, small business owners need to hone their listening skills, be attentive to the needs of their team members and find ways to keep their teams motivated. This is definitely no small feat, but by practicing a few simple steps, small business owners can make the difference needed to build healthy, happy workforces that will ultimately become the bedrock of their business, enabling its long-term sustainability.

Mental health in focus

In the most recent Mental State of the World report, published by Sapien Labs, South Africa scored the lowest amongst 34 countries in terms of its Mental Health Quotient (MHQ) score – an aggregate metric of mental wellbeing. In this study, the MHQ score took into account several factors including the mood and outlook of South Africans, their drive and motivation, their ability to perform basic cognitive functions, their social self and the mind-body connection. South Africa scored a low 46 out of 100.

Focusing on the South African workplace reveals similar findings. According to the Employee Assistance Professionals Association of South Africa (EAPA-SA), conservative estimates conclude that as much as one quarter of South African employees will be diagnosed with depression during the course of their employment. A staggering 75% to 85% of these workers will not seek out or receive health or treatment for their condition.

The impact of this on business operations can be devastating. Some of the consequences include absenteeism, presenteeism (being at work but being unwell and unable to function efficiently), losses in productivity and the decline of morale. Ultimately, not only do these effects play out in harmful ways within the lives of employees, but they can also erode business' bottom-line and compromise its ability to grow and scale and more importantly – keep its doors open. This is even more true of employees in a small business, which relies heavily on human capital to maintain optimal output and produce products or services that are of a consistent high quality.

Time to take the lead

For small businesses across the country, the deterioration of mental health in the workplace is an urgent call to action. A significant part of being a capable leader is giving staff the time and resources they need to feel more fulfilled and satisfied in their jobs. To do this, small business leaders need to go beyond the realm of compensation. They need to dig deeper and put in the time and effort to restore human connections and foster healthier, more uplifting workplace cultures.

In the same way in which that mental health challenges can have widespread detrimental effects on a business, investing in the wellbeing of staff members can have the opposite effect. Workers who are mentally fit and nurtured in their personal and professional development journeys, are more likely to engage better with their peers, go the extra mile, deliver better quality work and feel part of the business' progress.

While small businesses may not have the funds or resources that their large counterparts have in terms of investing in employee wellness programmes and initiatives, these are three cost-effective strategies that leaders can take towards promoting better workplace cultures:

1. Start an anonymous feedback forum

As a small business owner, you can encourage a culture of transparency where employees feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns by allowing employees to offer their feedback through an anonymous forum.

Employees need to feel comfortable enough to share their opinions and feelings without fear of reproach or negative consequences. As part of your regular check-ins or staff meetings, you could share some of this feedback with the team and offer solutions and suggestions as a demonstration that your employees' feedback is being acknowledged and put to use.

2. Make regular breaks mandatory

Employees need to take regular breaks throughout the workday in order to maintain optimal productivity. As their leader, you could encourage employees to step away from their desks, take walks, or engage in activities that promote relaxation and stress relief. These kinds of activities could be included as mandatory 'tasks' on each employee's calendar, which will encourage each individual to take time out, and ultimately avoid becoming overly stressed and burnt out.

3. Celebrate the wins

Acknowledge and appreciate employees for their hard work and contributions. Recognition can boost morale, increase job satisfaction and staff retention, and positively impact mental well-being. The rewards for a job well done do not have to be exorbitant. Vouchers for online shopping, free coffee vouchers or even extra time-off are all examples of cost-effective incentives that can be used to motivate staff and make them feel appreciated.

Other incentives that won't cost a cent include flexible work days, casual dress days, mentions in company newsletters or on social media and schemes such as employee of the month.

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