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Navigating Mental Health and Emotions in the Workplace: Lessons from "Inside Out" and Beyond

By Lori A. Hoffner

Is this the new normal? For some, the uncertainty and change we face today can feel intimidating, while for others it can seem awkward or unfamiliar. Regardless of how we view the world, one thing is certain: it is another test of our resilience and the resilience of those we lead. Employees are increasingly looking to their managers and leaders for guidance, support, and empathy to help them navigate these ever-changing times. To meet this need, leaders must develop a new set of skills—particularly the ability to lead with compassion.

Compassion is the mindset that allows us to approach leadership with empathy, understanding, and care. It not only helps leaders support their teams during challenging times but also creates a healthy, supportive work environment where mental health is prioritized. Let's take the time to reflect on the importance of mental health in the workplace and how we, as leaders, can foster a culture of well-being.

Understanding the Importance of Mental Health in the Workplace

The mental health of employees has always been important, but it has become increasingly critical in today's fast-paced and often stressful work environments. Research has shown that mental health struggles, including depression, anxiety, burnout, and compassion fatigue, are significant contributors to suicidal thoughts and diminished well-being. For many people, these issues are exacerbated by external stressors such as the demands of work and home life.

Organizational leaders must prioritize mental health by addressing the barriers that prevent employees from seeking help. One of the most significant challenges is the stigma surrounding mental health issues in the workplace. Employees often fear being perceived as weak or unproductive if they speak openly about their mental health struggles. As leaders, we must break down these barriers by creating a supportive environment where seeking help is encouraged and normalized. This shift not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the organization by fostering a healthier, more resilient workforce.

Lessons from Pixar's *Inside Out*: The Power of Understanding Emotions

One of my favorite movies that beautifully illustrates the importance of understanding our emotions is Pixar's *Inside Out*. The film takes us on a journey through the mind of an 11-year-old girl

named Riley, as she navigates a significant life change. Inside her mind, five core emotions—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—guide her reactions to different events. The movie brilliantly highlights how all emotions, both positive and negative, play a crucial role in our mental well-being.

The lesson from *Inside Out* is that emotional health isn't just about experiencing joy or happiness all the time. It's about recognizing and accepting all of our emotions, even the difficult ones, and understanding that they serve a purpose. As leaders, we can take this lesson to heart when managing teams. Emotions are not one-dimensional, and it's normal to feel conflicted or uncertain. Someone may express anger on the surface, but deep down, it could be frustration, fear, or even a cry for help.



Encouraging employees to acknowledge and explore their emotions can foster a healthier work environment. When people feel safe to express their feelings without judgment, they are more likely to seek support when they need it, contributing to a culture of openness and mental well-being.

Emotions Are Information, Not Problems

Emotions serve as valuable signals, guiding our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. In *Inside Out*, Joy initially tries to suppress Sadness, believing that only positive emotions should dominate Riley's life. But as the movie unfolds, Joy learns that Sadness is equally important. It is through Sadness that Riley begins to process and heal from the challenges she faces. This message is profound: all emotions, whether positive or negative, have a role to play in our personal growth and resilience.

In the workplace, emotions often present themselves in ways that are not always helpful, such as frustration, stress, or even burnout. However, these emotions should not be dismissed or suppressed. There is nothing wrong with showing emotions, and often they stem from passion, commitment, or a deep sense of care. What's important is understanding how to manage and communicate emotions in a productive way, without imposing them on others.

As leaders, it's crucial to create an environment where emotions are acknowledged and respected. When we understand our own emotions, we become better equipped to understand and empathize with others, enhancing our ability to lead with compassion.

The Spectrum of Mental Health: Moving Beyond "Not Depressed"

Our understanding of mental health has evolved, and we now recognize that mental health exists on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is flourishing—optimal mental health where individuals feel engaged, fulfilled, and resilient. At the other end is depression, where individuals may feel hopeless, withdrawn, or overwhelmed by life's challenges. However, many people fall somewhere in the middle, in a state known as languishing.

Languishing, as described by psychologist Adam Grant, is a state of being where you aren't experiencing the symptoms of depression, but you're also not thriving. You might feel a lack of motivation, a sense of stagnation, or a general feeling of "meh." Grant explains that "not depressed" doesn't mean you aren't struggling. Likewise, "not burned out" doesn't mean you're excited and energized. Many of us are languishing, and the first step to moving out of this state is acknowledging it.

Recognizing languishing in ourselves and others allows us to break the silence surrounding this quiet form of despair. It also opens the door to conversations about how to improve mental health and well-being. By prioritizing mental health in the workplace and offering access to support without stigma or judgment, organizations can help employees move from languishing toward flourishing.

Leading with Compassion in Challenging Times

Compassion is more than just feeling sympathy for someone—it is the ability to understand the struggles others face and take meaningful action to help them. As leaders, demonstrating compassion means being attuned to the mental and emotional needs of our teams, creating spaces where employees feel heard and valued, and offering support when they need it most.

In today's world, where uncertainty and change seem constant, compassion is essential for guiding employees through difficult times. It's about recognizing that everyone is experiencing this new normal differently, and that mental health is deeply personal. Some may struggle with feelings of anxiety or fear, while others may experience burnout or compassion fatigue. Regardless of the specific challenge, it is our responsibility as leaders to offer understanding, flexibility, and support.

Practical Steps to Foster Mental Well-Being in the Workplace

There are several practical ways leaders can foster mental health and well-being in the workplace:

1. **Normalize Conversations About Mental Health:** Encourage open dialogue about mental health and well-being. When employees feel safe to share their struggles without fear of judgment, it breaks down stigma and fosters a supportive culture.
2. **Offer Mental Health Resources:** Provide access to mental health services such as employee assistance programs, counseling, or wellness workshops. Make sure employees know these resources are available and emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
3. **Promote Work-Life Balance:** Encourage employees to take breaks, use their vacation time, and set boundaries between work and personal life. A healthy work-life balance is essential for preventing burnout and promoting long-term well-being.
4. **Lead by Example:** As a leader, model the behaviors you want to see in your team. Be open about your own mental health journey, take time to care for your well-being, and demonstrate compassion in your interactions with others.

Building a Culture of Compassion

Incorporating compassion into leadership is essential for building a resilient, supportive workplace where mental health is prioritized. By understanding the emotions, we all experience and offering tangible support, leaders can help employees navigate the complexities of today's world with confidence and care. The lessons from Pixar's *Inside Out* remind us that emotions, both positive and negative, are a natural part of life and contribute to our personal growth and well-being. Let's use these insights to foster a compassionate environment where everyone feels supported, understood, and empowered to seek help when they need it.

Together, we can create a workplace culture that not only promotes mental health but also helps employees thrive, even in the face of uncertainty.

Lori A. Hoffner, Organizational Development Speaker & Trainer helps people and organizations create open, positive, and inclusive environments through her speaking, training, and consulting. Since 1997, Lori has had the pleasure of working with audiences across the country to help them learn, grow, and develop positive practices for their organizations. If you want more information on the topics of mental health and other workshops that Lori can provide, please [contact us](#).