

Work Life Imbalance: Support Your Staff in Today's Social Landscape

Published by Kaila Kea

I like to know what's going on around me. Keeping up with the news not only helps me stay informed and satisfies my need to hear others' stories; it helps me predict how current events might impact my clients. While there is no way to emotionally prepare for a tragedy, there are ways to support your employees during particularly volatile news cycles.

The country was divided in 2012 over the controversial shooting of Trayvon Martin. I remember feeling emotionally weighed down at the thought of his family, their loss, their pain, and the insurmountable concept of having to go on without their son, brother, family. Across the country, countless hearts went out to the Martins.

The following year the case was tried. The resulting acquittal seemed to swell that weight, heavy across my shoulders, and those of many others. Going to work the following day was difficult. Although the case had nothing to do with my work, turning such strong emotions on and off is not always an option. Coworkers smiled, laughed, and enjoyed water cooler talk like usual, but I felt hollow and distant.

Four years later, there are far too many similar examples to cite, and our country is more divided than ever before. It feels like every time we turn on the television, there is a bombing, shooting or stabbing that makes us all feel a little less safe and a lot more guarded. We watch the horrors that take place in our communities & witness other people's lives unravel as they are ravaged by the inhumane crimes of today's social landscape and then ... we're off to work.

It takes a toll, but realistically, what can employers do?

Stay Informed & Be Open.

Owners, managers, team leads and administrators have a duty to stay abreast of current events. Even a far-away news story may have a close-to-home impact for someone on your team, whether you realize it or not. Be sensitive to the possibility that an employee may be connected to a tragic, controversial, or political issue.

Don't Shy Away from Tough Conversations.

Talking to employees about such matters is a great start, but there is more to be done. Diversity is a beautiful part of life in the melting pot that is America, and your staff is likely comprised of various ages, genders, races, backgrounds, and even countries. While this opportunity for cultural communication is wonderful, tough conversations are an inevitability. As a leader, it is your job to not only handle such discussions responsibly, but also to face them head-on.

Talk to HR.

Talk to your HR department about how to be available for anyone who needs to talk through difficult local, national, or global issues. Whether work-related or not, such matters will weigh heavily on someone personally or emotionally affected, and will affect their productivity. Remember—the key word is *support*. Your employee does not need your opinion, your advice, or your help. Sometimes, just talking and feeling understood and accepted makes all the difference.

Talk to HR to understand the various resources that may be available for employees, such as an EAP or Employee Assistance Program. Eligible employees may be able to seek out counseling services if they are having an especially difficult time coming to work following tragic events.

HR can also advise you about how you can innovate potential solutions in your respective areas. For example, does the company have a Mental Health Awareness Day that allows employees to unplug from current events and tune in to their own needs? Is a Staff Counselor available? Do employees have to sacrifice a sick/personal day for MHD? Also inquire about resources available to you to become more knowledgeable about cultural competencies and sensitivity trainings to help you become a more supportive and well-rounded leader.

Moving Forward ...

Racial tensions, hate crimes, terrorism and political discord can make for a team that doesn't want to come to work. Employees may benefit from talking to a mental health professional about how they are being impacted. While you may not be in the position to make this referral, having a counselor on staff could be an invaluable resource for improvement.

Each person that is a part of the team you lead at work is facing a different battle each day. It may be personal, professional or both. Either way, it is important that leaders within the organization are willing to foster an environment that is not only productive but supportive. The more you invest in your employees and what matters to them, the more economically and socially profitable you become. Pour into your employees what you wish to receive.