

Healthy Leadership

# The undervalued role of executives for employees' health

Managers that do not take care of their health pass this attitude on to their employees.

Coaching can help.

**Employees that are physically and mentally healthy and highly motivated are more valuable to companies than ever before – and managers play one of the most crucial roles in this context. But what exactly is “healthy leadership”?**

Employees that are in good mental and physical health and feel appreciated are an asset to every company. This is not only because of the good working atmosphere and mood they create; studies regularly show that healthy employees show greater commitment and loyalty to their employer. In good health they are able to fully develop their personal and professional skills and proactively contribute to the success of the company by their performance. They also rate “their” company more positively and thus enhance their employer’s attractiveness on the job market. This also has a favorable effect on the recruitment of new employees in the face of demographic change and shortage of skilled personnel. The topic of employee health is particularly significant in connection with the deteriora-

tion in the economic outlook currently becoming apparent in various sectors of industry. Many companies are facing growing insecurity among their employees, which can also have an impact on their physical and mental health in the long run.

## Company health management

Company health management is often associated with activities designed to promote and maintain health, such as sports activities for company members, either inhouse or as partnerships with local gyms; health promotion days; healthy menus in cafeterias or ergonomic workplaces. But as employees face the strain of long commutes to and from work and the need to balance work and family, models based on flexible working are gaining importance. The issue is how much flexibility employees can have in deciding where and when to perform the tasks for their company. Flexibility in this respect enables them to harmonize their work with their individual needs more effectively, which can in turn be a major factor promoting good health.

However, companies and executives should look past the “trendiness factor” of many new forms of work and be aware that some disadvantages may be involved. Even the much lauded benefits of working from home or remote working can have health consequences from a certain point – for example, if boundaries between personal and professional life are blurred by the feeling of needing to be available at all times, or when feelings of isolation, exclusion and insecurity are created by being away from the office and the team.

## High-leverage health factor: executives

Executives are a leverage factor of a completely different kind in employee health, and one that is often overlooked. Alongside the overall structure of the company, they have a major influence on the physical and mental health of employees and teams. It starts with setting an example and acting as a role model for personal health awareness; managers who fail to take care of their personal needs, neglect their health and cannot balance out the day-to-

day stress of work will not encourage their employees to embrace health awareness. In addition, a lack of healthy mental and physical balance erodes the assurance and confidence which executives need to cope with the many demands of their varied leadership tasks. Executives' treatment of their employees is a further critical factor impacting on employee health. Employer rankings, the media, and other sources are packed with examples of how managers should not behave from a viewpoint of "healthy leadership": lack of trust, excessive control, inconsistency, destructive criticism and favoritism or cold-shouldering of employees generate extreme psychological stress in a team, which often leads to peaks of illness.

Employees may also suffer negative impacts on their physical and mental health when executives focus on errors, do not provide transparency and clarity and fail to give their teams the feeling of "having their back." What all these behaviors have in common is the lack of a general positive attitude towards the employees. In many cases, this may be attributed to the executive's own feeling of being overwhelmed by complex leadership situations. Management executives are involved in a permanent tug of war between opposing goals, creating conflicts that are frequently insoluble, and yet both goals are essential. For example, the team must deliver high-quality work, yet the work must also be completed fast. Long-term goals held by the executive and the company are often diametrically opposed to short-term operational goals.

When crises, restructuring measures, and high-pressure situations requiring urgent attention are added to the mix, executives that lack reserves of inner calm and have not developed resilience will quickly feel utterly unable to con-

sider their employees' wellbeing on top of everything else. They cannot see that a motivated and healthy team can actually support them. A positive, appreciative and interested attitude towards employees and people in general ensures that they feel valued. Together with recognition of the employees' commitment to the company, respect-based and clear communication and a positive working environment, this approach enables executives to foster their employees' mental and physical health.

### **Which competencies do executives need for "healthy leadership"?**

Executives are exposed to high demands on their knife-edge between company goals and employees' needs. As well as essential personal skills, they must have the willingness and ability to reflect on their own actions and bring inner stability and self-assurance to the table. High-level social skills and the ability to work as a team, take criticism, and deal with conflicts are likewise vital. Executives that feel "healthy" should also have resilience – the ability to handle pressure appropriately in their working life. And finally, outstanding communication skills, methodological expertise, and goal orientation are necessary elements in "healthy" leadership.

### **Personal coaching: one option**

So what can companies do to strengthen or develop these vital skills for "healthy leadership" in their executives – the inner stability and clarity, the empathy, respect and appreciativeness, the calmness in dealing with stress and value conflicts, or "simply" an awareness of their personal role as models? This is the ideal point to consider regular support in the form of professional coaching. By encouraging in-depth self-reflection, coaching can help executives to gradually develop individual

and unique solutions to concrete challenges and helpful perspectives and attitudes. Personal tools and procedures for specific situations can also be acquired; for instance, how to bring empathy and respect to life in the challenges of day-to-day management routine. Ideally, coaching of this kind is complemented by training courses that deliver concrete expertise, such as how to give feedback in an appreciative and respectful way.



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