The role of managers and supervisors in protecting and promoting employee work-life balance and mental health in higher education
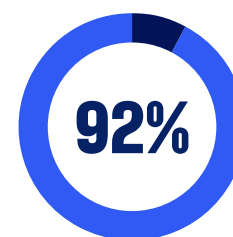
The TIAA Institute report "Why would someone want to work for my college or university? An Employee Value Proposition for higher education" (2023) identifies work-life balance as one of the top reasons employees are drawn to higher education. However, the report also indicates that a lack of work-life balance is one of the biggest reasons for leaving the industry. This commentary focuses on the role of managers and supervisors in supporting work-life balance and employee mental health, and how best to equip them with tools and skills to do so. This support, in turn, helps higher education institutions recruit and retain the workforce they need to fulfill their missions.

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Addressing employee mental health

Work-life balance can be negatively affected by high levels of stress at work, extreme demands placed on employees, low levels of control over work and low levels of supervisor support. Decades of research has linked these conditions with poor employee mental health (Rugulies et al., 2023). Yet only within the last few years have workplaces begun to understand and address the factors that contribute to declines in worker mental health and well-being (Hammer et al., 2024).

Much of this recent interest was sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic, when workers reported unprecedented levels of depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions, leading many to change jobs or leave the workplace all together. Educators and healthcare workers, for example, were especially impacted by extremely long work hours, workplace harassment, little control, low support and fears for safety—all preventable workplace conditions associated with increased depression, anxiety and burnout (Nigam et al., 2023). In a 2023 survey, 92% of employees reported that it was "very" or "somewhat important" to work for an organization that provides support for mental health (APA, 2023).

92%

Very or somewhat important to work for an organization which provides mental health support.

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Important evidence-based strategies to improve work-life balance and workplace mental health include better designing work to reduce high levels of job stress, and training managers and supervisors on how to be more supportive of their employees. These strategies are important to employee health and well-being, as well as the health and well-being of the workplace overall.

Redesigning the workplace to improve mental health and well-being

Work is recognized as a [social determinant of health](), a nonmedical factor that influences a wide range of health, functioning and quality-of-life risks and outcomes. My colleagues and I describe work as a "missing link"[5] in addressing and improving mental health and well-being (Hammer et al., 2022). The World Health Organization's guidelines on mental health at work (2022) and the "U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being" (2022) emphasize the important role the workplace has in creating a culture of connectivity, meaning, and support for the worker. Both reports identify workplace redesign and manager training to support worker mental health as important approaches to protect and promote mental health.

> Work: the missing link in addressing mental health and well-being.

An organizational approach to promoting mental health and work-life balance

We know that low levels of control over where, when, and how we work, as well as low social support and high demands and deadlines, are all associated with increased stress and both mental and physical illness (Niedhammer et al., 2021). And these workplace conditions can be modified via targeted interventions aimed at job redesign and training managers to increase social support, both of which minimize psychological risk and promote health and well-being. However, most interventions to improve worker work-life balance and mental health take an individual-level approach through strategies directed toward stress reduction, meditation and psychotherapy rather than an organizational approach, which aims to change the employee's working conditions and environment, including improving healthy leadership.

In response to the WHO guidelines on mental health at work, "U.S. Surgeon General's framework for Workplace Mental

Health and Well-Being" and the Surgeon General's report documenting increased loneliness as a public health crisis (2022), my colleagues and I developed a framework to offer managers strategies to help employees, as described below.

Training supervisors to protect and promote employee mental health and work-life balance

Supervisors are critical in contributing to a positive culture of support and work-life balance for employees—and reliance upon them to do so has been heightened during these uncertain and stressful times. Supervisors are often the first to notice signs of work-life stress and mental health challenges among employees, and how they respond can have a significant impact on employees. Training managers, supervisors and other leaders in specific supportive behaviors can protect employees against risk factors and foster improved social connections among workers (Hammer et al., 2024).

Our training framework is grounded in family supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSBs) and mental health supportive supervisor behaviors (MHSSBs). The training focuses on five key behaviors that support work-life balance and mental health:

- Emotional support
- Practical support
- Role modeling
- Workplace redesign
- Stigma reduction

Training supervisors in these supportive behaviors is a promising new evidence-based approach to improving work-life balance and mental health in the workplace. Here are strategies supervisors and managers can deploy to offer such support:

Emotional support

Emotional support encompasses supervisors providing care through increasing contact (face-to-face or virtually) with employees, asking how employees are doing, and communicating genuine concern about their work-life balance and mental health challenges. Providing emotional support involves letting employees know they're cared for and that they should feel comfortable raising work- and nonwork-related challenges. Emotional supportive behaviors include being clear to employees that you're sympathetic and that you'll maintain an open-door policy—virtually at least—for them to talk through issues when needed. Emotional support also involves discussing what work-life integration means to team members. A wide variety of life situations and individual priorities likely will exist within the team; the

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opportunity to share those things with each other brings the team closer together. Further, blocking out time in your weekly team meetings for employees (who are comfortable doing so) to share life updates and any known conflicts that might affect the team also will help provide emotional support.

Practical support

Practical support entails behaviors such as helping workers manage their schedules and resolve scheduling conflicts. For example, helping an employee find a replacement, if absent, or responding to your employees' work and family needs with practical solutions—such as schedule changes, policy information, job guidance and the necessary resources to address their needs—is meaningful assistance.

Practical support also means learning to identify when an employee seems overwhelmed and clarifying work priorities. Listening to employees' work-life conflicts and creatively brainstorming solutions with them is another important example of practical support, as is providing increased flexibility for where, when or how work is done. Knowing about workplace and public policy resources—e.g., state and federal family and sick leave policies—and sharing this information with employees is another way to offer practical support.

Role modeling

Role modeling is when supervisors demonstrate how they're taking care of their own work-life challenges. Discussing taking time out to attend a child's school activities and talking about one's own family, leaving work at reasonable hours and/or showing that you value involvement in life events outside work are all ways to role model healthy behaviors.

More specifically, role modeling includes demonstrating and providing guidance on ways to integrate work and family obligations and showing care for your own well-being. Defining your own boundaries and preferences about work hours, response times and disclosure around family obligations are great examples of role modeling—provided you consistently adhere to these boundaries. Managers also can role model by taking their paid time off, sick leave when needed and encouraging their staff to do the same. In short, supervisors should set an example for their teams through their own behaviors and guidance on how to integrate work-life obligations and engage in self-care.

Creatively redesigning work

Strategies aimed at redesigning work to reduce conflicting work-life demands and, likewise, better support employee work-life balance and mental health is a win-win for both employees and employers. For example, training employees across functions and fostering autonomy helps meet employees' needs for scheduling flexibility in response to job demands. Creative redesign can also include reducing undue burdens by identifying projects with flexible deadlines, helping prioritize tasks and removing irrelevant tasks.

Most importantly, creatively redesigning work requires the recognition that there are many modifiable aspects of work related to the number of demands, the degree of control and the amount of support offered that can significantly impact work-life balance and mental health in negative or positive ways, depending on how they're managed.

Reducing stigma

Stigma refers to a negative social attitude associated with a characteristic of an individual, such as having mental health challenges or even certain types of family responsibilities. For example, generally it's much more "acceptable" for employees to take time off work for a child-related responsibility compared to a parent-related responsibility. Supportive managers and supervisors can help reduce this stigma.

Furthermore, unlike seeking treatment for some other illnesses, people often face several societal and economic barriers—including concerns about stigma—that prevent or reduce the likelihood of seeking and receiving treatment for mental health challenges. Managers can set the tone and increase the psychological safety and comfort for employees who would benefit from seeking help regarding mental health issues, and in discussing and sharing nonwork-related demands. Managers and supervisors who clearly communicate that it is healthy, safe and normal to seek help and support regularly, and when in need, help reduce such stigma. Furthermore, when managers share their own challenges, their healthy coping strategies, and prioritize their mental health and work-life balance needs, their role modeling helps reduce the stigma associated with nonwork responsibilities and mental health challenges.

Final word

A culture of support can go a long way toward improving employee health and well-being—and retention and recruitment because we know work-life balance is an important consideration for individuals making job choices. Employees working under supervisors who've been trained on family-supportive supervisor behaviors and mental health–supportive supervisor behaviors report greater work-life balance and well-being. Please see supportiveworkplaces.org for more resources on supervisor trainings.

> A culture of supervisor support leads to greater employee work-life balance and well-being.

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