

How Mindfulness and Situational Awareness Training Help Workers

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Benefits such as mindfulness training can result in happier, mentally healthier employees, while situational awareness training can help employees identify risks to safety and the work environment.

Mindfulness and *situational awareness* may seem like industry buzzwords, but they're words to which a benefits planner may want to pay attention. These concepts can be understood in two key ways for workforces of all sizes.

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. It's more than yoga and meditation; it's being aware of one's own internal health and wellness—something benefits planners put a lot of time and energy into fostering among their workforces.

A healthy employee has a healthy mind as well as a healthy body. Mindfulness describes a comprehensive, integrated approach toward improving health and productivity in work environments. It allows employers to help employees become more aware of their overall health status and risk factors and provide them with tools, resources and coaching to take control of their lives and make healthy changes and choices.

When used proactively with other wellness and benefits tactics, mindfulness can boost employee resiliency and reduce the prevalence of gaps caused by absenteeism.

Situational awareness is an external application of that same mindfulness. It's the ability to frame one's mind to know what is going on in workplace surroundings, to identify any deviations from the norm or standard processes, and to address unsafe conditions, environments and potential risks before they become problematic.

The military and security-related fields for decades have focused on this type of mindfulness about the work environment. Today, it's becoming more and more important for experts in occupational health and safety, department leadership and human resources, including benefits management.

Employees who are mindful of their own health and wellness also tend to have better situational awareness. They're more apt to silently influence co-workers to be mindful—in ways large and small. The co-worker who carries her step-counting smartphone app with her each time she leaves her desk, for example, eventually may get other co-workers thinking about how many steps *they* take. The more mindful a workforce is, the more resilient its members will be to an adverse situation at a personal or companywide level.

The Role of the Benefits Manager

As organizations realize the connections among mental health, positive workplace relationships, culture and productivity, they more often are promoting benefits and programs that allow employees not only to seek help but also to identify stress and adverse lifestyle behaviors before the negative consequences spill over into the workplace.

Benefits managers in charge of analyzing, designing and administering programs are in an important position to offer company leadership the mindfulness and situational awareness tools they need to identify trends related to department issues and workplace-related stress.

Many factors that contribute to a dwindling bottom line—high attrition rates, absenteeism, disability claims and lost productivity, to name a few—can be improved by offering situational awareness and mindfulness programs as part of a company's benefits package.

Consider the larger scale impact of robust benefit plans as well. Rarely does a day go by without disturbing news that impacts the collective workplace—domestic violence, data breaches and identity theft, school and workplace shootings, and city and campus riots.

For Laurie Anne Spagnola, president and CEO of the Board of Child Care of the United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, the civil unrest in 2015 caused a major disruption for her workforce. Certain key commuter arteries in the city were closed, preventing some employees from getting to work. Through the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, Spagnola was put in touch with a crisis counselor. The next day, a counselor with experience with crisis situations was at the Board of Child Care Baltimore campus talking with employees.

“That meant a lot to our 450 employees, knowing that we were taking care of them,” said Spagnola. “Their situational awareness was heightened, and the crisis counselor helped provide calm inside while the unrest continued outside.”

Benefits That Improve Mindfulness

Several products in the overall benefit package can help with mindfulness. Three useful benefits to consider, if an organization doesn't already offer them, are:

- **An employee assistance program (EAP).** An EAP that is comprehensive enough to include support on everything from stress management to life transitions counseling to family care options provides quick, reliable guidance so employees can come to work with greater peace of mind. Even better is a program that also covers alcohol and other drug abuse treatment counseling, domestic issues and crisis counseling. A robust EAP can have a significant impact on employees' productivity and attitude.
- **Resilience training.** Programs that incorporate resilience training help improve the quality of life and stress level of the employee. They foster the ability to adapt and recover quickly after stress, adversity, trauma or tragedy. Employees with a resilient disposition are better able to maintain a healthy level of physical and psychological well-being in the face of a challenge.
- **Bullying policies.** Humiliating, intimidating or verbally abusing a co-worker is a form of psychological violence in the workplace.

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Companies that address bullying through training and/or written policies set expectations for a respectful workplace.

Programs to Help Increase Situational Awareness

Benefits managers can partner with an organization's security or training department to offer ongoing programs and training sessions to help raise situational awareness levels among staff. These programs include:

- **Crisis preparation, training and drills.** Forward-looking companies that develop crisis plans, offer crisis training and conduct crisis drills are one step closer to creating a resilient workforce.

- **Deescalating violence training.** Managers, including those in human resources, may benefit from training to help deescalate anger and violent behavior. National programs like the Mandt System provide hands-on training for managers and staff.
- **Trauma-informed care/adverse childhood experience (ACE) training.** Studies show that 66% of the general population is affected by ACEs. These experiences may present undesirable effects on now-adult lives. It's wise to be aware of employees' actions while at work if they mark a significant contrast to their normal behavior. Training can help foster better understanding, as well as thoughtful and appropriate interactions.

takeaways

- Mindfulness training can boost employee resiliency and reduce workplace absenteeism.
- Being aware of what is going on in workplace surroundings and able to identify any deviations from the norm help address unsafe conditions, environments and potential risks before they become problematic.
- A comprehensive EAP, resilience training and policies against bullying can help make employees more mindful.
- Preparation for crises and training in deescalating violence and in dealing with trauma and adverse childhood experiences can promote situational awareness.
- Supervisors and other employees can be trained to see signs of depression, responsible for an estimated 200 million lost workdays each year, substance abuse and other mental health concerns.

The Power of Training

Training is the next step in situational awareness for not only executive leadership and management but also employees. Increased awareness of difficult situations and workplace risk, coupled with effective training on how to respond, has been proved to reduce workplace violence incidents.

Often, management and leadership aren't aware of low-level violent behav-

ior or simmering issues because employees aren't able to identify the behavior as a precursor to potentially more serious or dangerous behavior. Training can provide to leaders and other employees a holistic understanding of expected behavior, as well as behavior that violates codes of conduct or policies and procedures.

Why Care?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 200 million workdays are lost each year in association with depression, costing workplaces between \$17 billion and \$44 billion per year.¹ These costs confirm the importance of designing workplace programs to incorporate supplemental benefits addressing depression, mental health and wellness.

The CDC recognizes that active EAPs encompassing a broad range of services and integrated into the workplace are one of the most important ways to support employees.

Implementing Benefits or Programs That Foster Mindfulness and Situational Awareness

A benefits team can research the cost of providing a thorough benefit package compared with the rising costs of disability related to mental illness, stress, psychological violence (bullying) and physical violence in the workplace. Presenting these figures to organization leaders may persuade them that mindfulness and situational awareness programs will be worth the investment.

Employees often don't know what to look for or whom to address with concerns about stress, bullying and workplace violence. Benefits managers partnering with the training arm of the organization can design a package that includes professional development opportunities to attract and retain employees.

Increased awareness of the effects of mental health-related issues (and support or treatment options) through training, communications and benefit discussions allows the organization as a whole to be mindful and situationally aware. Those initiatives can help workers more readily identify an employee who is at risk for increased stress, depression, substance abuse and other mental health concerns.

Mental illness and adverse mental health issues are treatable—once they have been identified. A solid EAP program, especially one with licensed counselors, will provide the resources employees need to seek help and treatment.

Compared with workers of past generations, today's job seekers are not as focused on salary. They also take into con-

sideration the overall benefits package and culture of the organization. An organization's "employment brand" sets it apart from other employers and can position it as a top workplace, which helps with recruiting the right talent in a competitive job market.

Offering mindfulness and situational training as part of the benefits package can increase leadership involvement, employee engagement and health and happiness levels—improving the bottom line and strengthening the employment brand. **■**

Endnote

1. *Workplace Health Promotion—Depression*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/implementation/topics/depression.html.

bios



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