



MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT:

How to Lead with Empathy



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Executive Summary

The past few years have been a turbulent time for employees and employers alike—from ongoing financial pressures and increasing workloads to revolutionary tech like AI taking businesses by storm.

Ever since employee stress spiked during the pandemic, it has continued to remain at record-high levels, **with 68% of employers recognizing job-related stress as a top concern among behavioral health issues.**¹

However, **only 43% of companies offer some sort of mental health coverage**—so what's the disconnect?²

It all comes down to leadership. The leader's role is becoming increasingly critical in supporting employees and addressing mental health issues from the ground up. Put simply, leaders—including managers and supervisors—have an unshakeable influence over how happy, committed, and productive employees are on a day-to-day basis.

But that's a lot to put on an executive's already full plate.

Fortunately, our network of corporate wellness leaders has created this actionable workplace wellness toolkit designed to help you address the employee mental health crisis with two key ingredients—empathy and emotional intelligence.

By prioritizing both, you not only stand to revitalize the wellbeing of your workforce, but you will also optimize your organization to boost key performance benchmarks such as productivity, creativity, engagement, satisfaction, and retention—bringing your business to the next level.

Alice Raflores, PHR, SHRM-CP

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The Current State of Mental Health in the Workplace

Over the last few years, companies have come to [realize they must do more](#) to maintain (and ideally improve) their employees' wellbeing. Unfortunately, that has often meant encouraging a nebulous idea of "wellbeing" by promoting exercise and nutrition without truly assessing the culture and climate needs of their organizations and following up with strategic initiatives that drive change.

The result?

Leaders have run into numerous obstacles along their corporate wellness journeys, from limited results to disengaged employees. Understanding the challenges they face is the first step to creating a healthier workplace. But what are they exactly?

Three Common Obstacles Leaders Face in Addressing Employee Mental Health

In our work developing and [optimizing workplace wellness programs](#), our team of corporate wellness experts has consistently come across 3 main issues impacting employee mental health today:

- 1. Open communication isn't prioritized or promoted**
- 2. Empathy isn't modeled from the top-down**
- 3. Interpersonal team conflicts are left unchecked**

Let's take a closer look at each obstacle to see how leaders can overcome them with a holistic approach.



OBSTACLE 1:

Open Communication Isn't Prioritized or Promoted

Open communication is critical for creating a culture that not only addresses mental health, but destigmatizes it, encourages honest discussions, and supports employees in the workplace.

When employees feel they can't speak up, it creates an isolating experience where team members feel unheard and undervalued. Leaders must encourage regular, open discussions where employees can speak freely about their mental health and the challenges they're facing.

More than providing a platform for voices, open communication should extend to the very core of an organization's values. From policy changes to pay ranges, employees at all levels want to know what's going on in the organization they invest their time and livelihoods into.

Looking for more ways to prioritize communication and improve mental health? Check out our **Weekly Check-In Roadmap Infographic**.



Weekly Check-In Roadmap

How Managers Can Foster Stigma-Free Conversation with Employees

Learn how to navigate open communication with this roadmap to workplace wellness.



Set a Weekly 1-on-1

Schedule weekly, flexible 1-on-1 meetings with employees to catch up, listen to their questions and concerns, address any emerging problems, and accommodate their needs.



Listen More, Talk Less

Let employees speak freely during 1-on-1 meetings, giving them your full attention. Be sure to follow up on discussions to ensure they feel heard.

3

Create an Editable Agenda

Develop collaborative and flexible agendas for weekly meetings that allow employees to contribute personal and professional updates while saving space for important talking points.



4

Follow the F15-L15 Rule

Use the first and last 15 minutes in meetings to open and close on a positive note. That way, employees will leave feeling encouraged.



Ask for Feedback

Regularly seek feedback on the cadence, structure, and effectiveness of 1-on-1 meetings from each employee, allowing them to actively shape the conversation.



Prioritize Personal and Professional Conversations

Balance conversations with both personal and professional updates to foster an open, empathetic environment while showing employees that they are valued.

5



Start, Stop, Continue

Jumpstart the feedback process by asking employees what to **start** doing in the next meeting, **stop** doing from the last, and **continue** into the next.

7



OBSTACLE 2:

Empathy Isn't Modeled from the Top-Down

Empathy is an integral aspect of leadership that often gets overlooked, yet it's fundamental to nurturing a successful, stress-free workplace.

Leaders who exhibit empathy foster trust and understanding among team members, which is a must-have requirement for employees' overall mental wellbeing.

Everyone knows the archetype of the cold and calculating businessperson who succeeds at all costs, but the reality is that these personality traits are far from a recipe for success. Without social-emotional skills, the workplace can quickly devolve into conflicts and [toxic office politics](#) that impact everyone's mental health and [lead to stress and burnout](#).

Leaders who are able to empathize with their team members create a more inclusive and supportive environment by considering various perspectives and taking the time to understand how people are feeling. Cultivating this emotional intelligence from the top-down is crucial for empathy to become embedded in an organization's culture.



Evaluate Your Emotional Intelligence Score

To help leaders gauge their current level of emotional intelligence, we’ve designed this quick interactive quiz. **Fill in the answers and add up your total to find out your score:**

1. I understand how employees’ experiences affect their feelings, thoughts, and behavior.

1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always

2. I regularly acknowledge my strengths and weaknesses as a leader.

1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always

3. I can describe my feelings in detail, beyond just “happy,” “sad,” “angry,” and so on.

1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always

4. I know how to help teams manage stress, and I actively check in with individuals.

1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always

5. I help my teams focus on opportunities rather than obstacles.

1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always



Evaluate Your Emotional Intelligence Score

To help leaders gauge their current level of emotional intelligence, we’ve designed this quick interactive quiz. **Fill in the answers and add up your total to find out your score:**

6. I devote time and energy to understanding why members of my organization behave the way they do.

- 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always
-

7. I readily understand others’ viewpoints, even when they are different from my own.

- 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always
-

8. I’m flexible when situations change unexpectedly and I adjust goals as needed.

- 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always
-

9. I understand how stress affects my own mood and behavior.

- 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always
-

10. My curiosity about others drives me to listen attentively to them.

- 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Sometimes 4) Most of the time 5) Always



40-50: Excellent Emotional Intelligence

Congratulations! If you scored in this range, you demonstrate exceptional emotional intelligence and have an acute understanding of your own and others' emotions. You excel in empathetic communication, conflict resolution, and maintaining positive relationships in your organization.

Continue to hone your leadership abilities to drive team cohesion and foster a supportive work environment.

See How
You Scored



30-40: Great Emotional Intelligence

Scoring in this range means you have strong emotional intelligence. You're typically good at recognizing and managing your own emotions, as well as understanding those of others. You can effectively navigate and maintain healthy professional relationships, but there's always room to improve.

See How You Scored



20-30: Sufficient Emotional Intelligence

In this range, you have a fair degree of emotional intelligence. You likely have a decent understanding of your own emotions, but may have difficulty identifying the feelings of others from time to time. While you are generally effective at managing professional relationships, there's room to develop your empathy and emotional regulation skills.



10-20: Emotional Intelligence Has Room for Improvement

Scoring here suggests there's work to be done to improve your level of emotional intelligence. You might struggle to understand and manage your emotions in difficult situations or find it challenging to empathize with others. Improving these areas can significantly enhance your interpersonal skills and workplace effectiveness.



0-10: Emotional Intelligence Training Needed

A score in this range indicates a strong need for additional emotional intelligence training. This may mean you often misinterpret or suppress your emotions and those of others, leading to breakdowns in communication. Focused training can significantly improve these crucial skills for both personal and professional growth.

OBSTACLE 3:

Interpersonal Team Conflicts Are Left Unchecked

Finally, the third—and perhaps most challenging—obstacle leaders face in improving mental health in the workplace is the dreaded team conflict. Whether they arise from miscommunications, personality clashes, or just different work styles, these disputes can lead to a breakdown in teamwork and collaboration.

Navigating interpersonal conflicts can be uncomfortable, but the alternative of ignoring them can quickly transform minor problems into a toxic work culture, especially when productivity and team morale begin to tank.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to solving workplace disputes, but there are a few things leaders can do to mediate and mitigate them. This usually involves a combination of strong emotional intelligence, open communication, and team synergy, where leaders actively listen to all parties, acknowledge their perspectives, and help facilitate constructive dialogues to find mutually beneficial solutions.

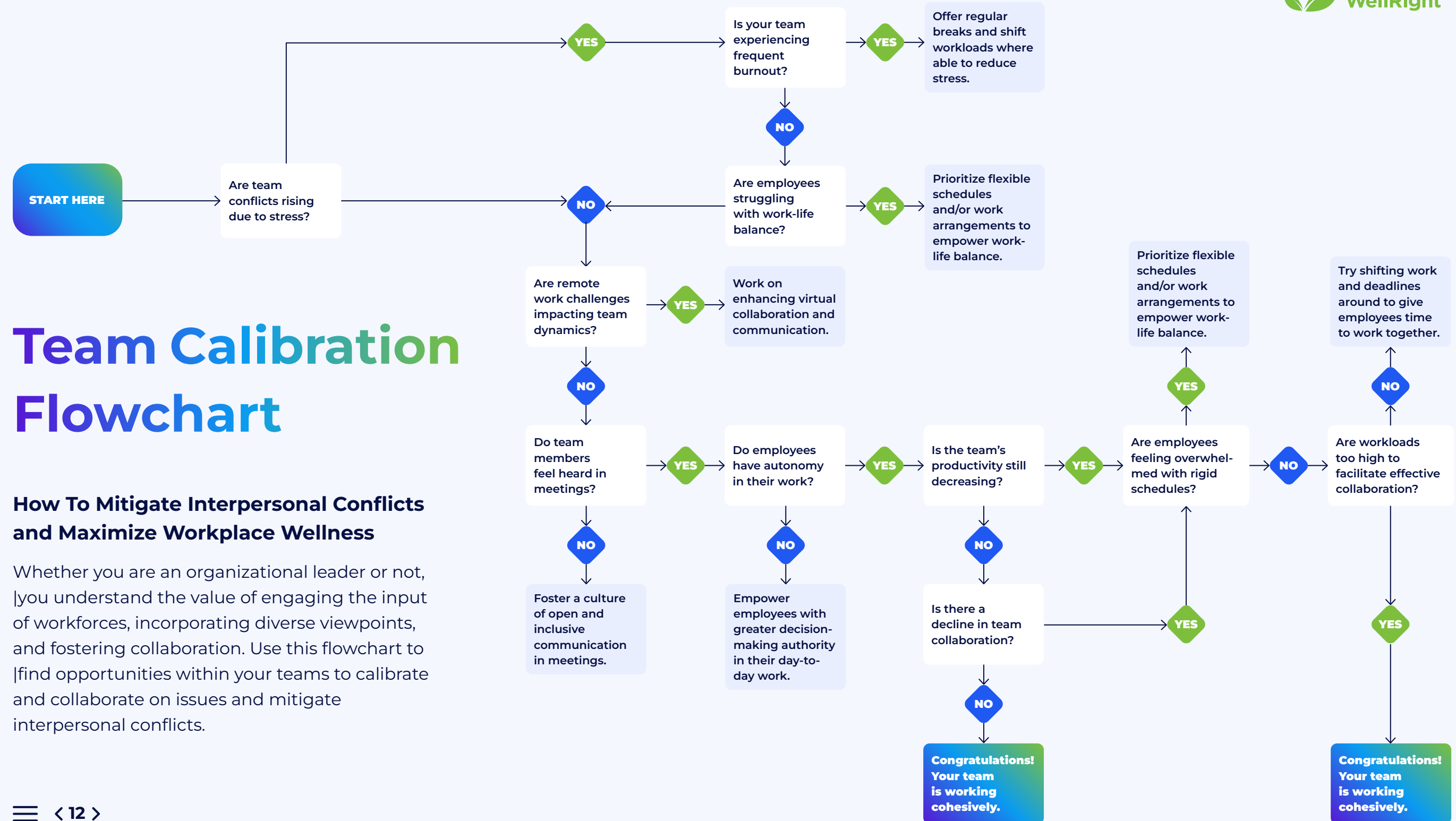
By tackling team conflicts with empathy, leaders can maintain a healthy, productive work environment that nurtures both individual and collective growth.



Team Calibration Flowchart

How To Mitigate Interpersonal Conflicts and Maximize Workplace Wellness

Whether you are an organizational leader or not, you understand the value of engaging the input of workforces, incorporating diverse viewpoints, and fostering collaboration. Use this flowchart to find opportunities within your teams to calibrate and collaborate on issues and mitigate interpersonal conflicts.



How Leaders Can Start Rethinking Mental Health in the Workplace

Addressing mental health in the workplace is a complex, yet crucial aspect of effective leadership. Employers can no longer rely on outdated ideas of wellness or hands-off approaches that leave employees feeling disconnected and disengaged.

Today's [employees want their companies](#) to care about them. That means encouraging regular open conversations, modeling empathetic leadership from the top down, and actively resolving disputes as they arise in the workplace.

As leaders continue to work on their mental health support systems and resources, it will be critical to involve employees in shaping these conversations through regular feedback. This collaborative approach will not only empower employees and enhance their engagement, but demonstrate a willingness to adapt and grow to lead effectively.

With this toolkit and these strategies, leaders can create a more empathetic, communicative, and mentally healthy workplace.



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