

McKinsey Health Institute

Leading with compassion: Prioritizing workplace mental health

Mental-health advocate Poppy Jaman identifies strategies companies could employ to improve the health and well-being of their workforces.

by Martin Dewhurst



As the pandemic largely fades from the spotlight, it leaves in its wake new realities for employers struggling to stem the tide of employee burnout. Prioritizing mental health and well-being in the workplace offers a provocative framework for a revised business strategy anchored in compassion and support.

Mental-health advocate and policy adviser Poppy Jaman, who is the global CEO of the MindFoward Alliance and previous CEO of City Mental Health Alliance UK, places mental health at the center of a global business movement. She highlights how it can be reflected in board agendas; in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategies; on the risk register; in new-business frameworks; and in job designs, among other places. In a follow-up to her conversation with McKinsey senior partner Ramesh Srinivasan on managing mental health in all aspects of personal and professional life, Poppy sat down with McKinsey's Martin Dewhurst, a senior partner and co-leader of the McKinsey Health Institute (MHI). The following is an edited version of their conversation.

Martin Dewhurst: Why is workplace mental health such an important topic?

Poppy Jaman: Workplace mental health is an incredibly timely and important topic. Prepandemic, we already had a massive need for an increased focus on mental health beyond the context of our

health systems. The pandemic—with increased mental-health struggles globally (especially among young people), diminished access to mental-health services, and so much more—as well as the return to work, has exacerbated the challenges.

As a result of these cumulative factors, many people—particularly women¹—are leaving the workforce, which could affect productivity. Our focus needs to be on creating workplaces where humans can flourish. If we're not taking care of people, then what are we doing?

Martin Dewhurst: Do you see mental health becoming a strategic imperative for companies?

Poppy Jaman: Over the last decade, leaders from all around the world have asked how to make mental health a business goal and include it on the boardroom agenda. But few have had the courage to set in motion a strategy that would last beyond their tenure. Mental health is not an issue that is going to end within their careers, so the current climate of "short-termism" has been a real barrier. Now, the pandemic has expanded the need but also enhanced leaders' courage to lean in on this agenda, partly because they were all asking the question "How are you?" and listening.

Martin Dewhurst: Where does mental health fit into the ESG agenda?

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¹ McKinsey's Women in the Workplace report found one in three women were considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their career—a substantial increase from one in four in the first few months of the pandemic. The stressors they cited included burnout, stress, and exhaustion.

Poppy Jaman: Businesses are taking ESG very seriously. The “E” and “G” are well understood and established. Now we are working on the “S,” which typically has dealt with issues such as social mobility and human rights within the supply chain. We say that “S” is also for stakeholders—including employees. Social impact encompasses what happens within an organization and includes putting workplace mental health on boardroom agendas and on risk registers. For example, we’ve seen an increase in resources allocated to hiring mental-health directors and well-being leads. We’re nowhere near the end of this journey; we’re at the beginning. But many possibilities are coalescing to make this a global business movement.

Martin Dewhurst: You’ve spoken about the powerful concept of “well-being capital.” What is it, and where does it fit into the ESG agenda?

Poppy Jaman: We are introducing well-being capital as a business framework. When you create an environment of psychological safety and well-being, you create well-being capital, which boosts performance in healthy ways and enhances your bottom line. We are beginning to see data collected to validate the well-being capital model. We also promote moving mental health outside the health-and-safety domain, which was established in the 1970s to prevent accidents and the like. Well-being capital is a business output.

Martin Dewhurst: That aligns well with our findings at MHI. Additionally, we have identified the importance of establishing a common language and using data and standards to provide the consistency and backbone we need to have these conversations in a structured way. Also, even well-intentioned employers have often focused on providing mental-health support and resources after the fact. Instead, we believe companies need to move upstream to create workplaces that are inclusive, equitable, and

supportive in order to minimize acute mental-health needs among employees.

How can leadership skills and strategies evolve to promote a focus on well-being capital and health creation?

Poppy Jaman: We need from leaders the same qualities and skills they exhibited during the pandemic, including vulnerability, calmness, kindness, and compassion. If you’re not leading with compassion, then you risk losing talent because that’s what the next generation expects.

Leaders will also need to change job designs because young people aren’t willing to work in the ways that previous generations have. People who left their jobs as part of the “mass resignation” are burned out; cumulative stressors pushed them to the point where they decided, “Something’s got to give, and that’s this job.”

Additionally, don’t underestimate the power of mental-health awareness and mental-health campaigns. Although high-level strategic and structural changes are important, we also need to consistently educate the workforce so that people can recognize their own stressors and take action.

Finally, the idea of languishing is important for leaders to address. Many people may not feel so hopeless, depressed, or exhausted that they quit, but they lack drive and are just muddling through each day. They don’t have ill health, but they also aren’t well.

Martin Dewhurst: As one leader described it to me, the languishing group is the hidden part of the iceberg. If leaders intervene early to create purpose, energy, inclusiveness, and direction, then they can avoid the languishing group becoming acutely ill.

As you reflect on your career, what is one thing you might do differently based on what you've learned?

Poppy Jaman: I'm British Bengali, and I'm clearly a Brown woman. I wish I had done more to call out sexism, misogyny, and racism that I've seen and experienced within my workplaces. I didn't do that as often as I wished because of the emotional labor required and for self-preservation. I witnessed that people who spoke up about race and gender issues were pigeonholed as difficult people, and then they didn't get invited back to the table. I didn't want to be excluded, so sometimes I kept my mouth firmly closed. Other times it was just too tiring, so it was easier to ignore what was going on. But there are very few Bengali women in leadership settings, and, especially during the pandemic, I needed to be the voice of my family community, my ethnicity community, and my gender community.

Martin Dewhurst: What are your thoughts on the concept of allyship?

Poppy Jaman: Allyship needs to be articulated, fostered, and developed in every business. There's no shortage of people who want to lean in and do

the right thing, but sometimes they don't know how. It is an incredible privilege to remove barriers that you haven't personally experienced. This is another opportunity for courageous leaders to start strategies that will outlive their tenure.

I'm currently learning about gender diversity and gender-nonconforming people so that I can help find ways to remove barriers for them. That's how allyship works. Get educated, understand your privilege, and then work out ways to support each other.

Martin Dewhurst: What is one thing you wish we could change about our understanding of mental health?

Poppy Jaman: I would remove shame from the mental-health narrative. If we all work within ourselves and our communities, workplaces, and families to expunge feelings of shame about mental health, we could change everything overnight.

Poppy Jaman is the global CEO of MindForward Alliance, a global not-for-profit membership organization transforming workplace culture into one that supports the mental health of its employees. **Martin Dewhurst** is a senior partner in McKinsey's London office and a co-leader of the McKinsey Health Institute.

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