Manager Toolkit

Weaving Mental Health Support Into Everyday Leadership

This toolkit helps managers create emotionally safe, high-performing teams through practical tools, language, and everyday actions.

Managers play an important role in supporting well-being, but they are not therapists and are not expected to diagnose or provide clinical care. This guide is prevention-focused, designed to help managers build a supportive environment through consistent, repeatable behaviors.

Mental health support isn't built in big moments; it's built through small, everyday interactions.

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The Manager's Role in Creating a Mentally Safe Workplace

Managers shape whether employees feel safe to speak up, ask for help, and share ideas. Psychological safety is a key driver of performance. When it's present, teams collaborate more effectively, address challenges earlier, and stay engaged. When it's missing, people hold back, disengage, or avoid risk.

This environment is built through everyday interactions: how managers listen, respond, and create space for honest dialogue.

Small, consistent behaviors, like showing curiosity, responding thoughtfully, and acknowledging challenges, build trust over time and help teams do their best work.

Quick Self-Assessment

- Do my team members feel safe bringing up stress?
- How do I respond when someone is overwhelmed?
- Do I default to fixing or listening?

Micro-Habits That Build Safety Over Time

Psychological safety is built in small moments. How managers respond during check-ins, meetings, and challenges shapes whether employees feel heard and supported.

- **Pause Before Responding:** A brief pause signals thoughtfulness and helps you respond with intention rather than reaction.
- **Ask One More Question:** Follow-up questions like "Can you tell me more?" deepen understanding and show genuine interest.
- **Reflect Back What You Hear:** Simple reflections, like "That sounds frustrating," help employees feel understood.
- **Thank Employees for Their Honesty:** Recognizing openness reinforces trust and encourages future communication.
- **Follow Up After Difficult Conversations:** A quick check-in shows continued care and builds reliability.
- **Consistency Builds Trust:** These small actions, repeated over time, create a foundation of trust and stronger team communication.

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Resources for Common Manager Moments

- Manager's Reflection Prompts
- Manager's Check-In Guide
- New Hire Check-In Template
- From Overwhelmed to Empowered: The Role of Therapy in Preventing Workplace Burnout
- How to Support Employees with PTSD at Work

Resources for Your Team

- Burnout: What It Is, How to Recognize It, and What You Can Do
- Navigating Anxiety and Overwhelm in a New Job
- What is Impostor Syndrome and How to Move through It
- Imposter Syndrome Toolkit

Navigating Conflict & Emotional Safety

Healthy teams are not conflict-free. Trust is built through how challenges are handled. Managers can preserve emotional safety by approaching conversations with clarity, curiosity, and

Giving Feedback

Use the Observation → Impact → Invitation framework:

- Observation: Describe what you noticed without judgment.
  - "In yesterday's meeting, I noticed you interrupted Sarah."
- Impact: Share how the behavior affected the situation or team.
  - "It shifted the tone of the conversation."
- Invitation: Open the door for dialogue and understanding.
  - "Can we talk about what was happening for you in that moment?"

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Navigating Conflict & Emotional Safety - 2

Safety-Preserving Phrases

Sometimes employees brace themselves when they hear feedback. These small framing statements

- Manager's Reflection Prompts
- Manager's Check-In Guide
- New Hire Check-In Template
- From Overwhelmed to Empowered: The Role of Therapy in Preventing Workplace Burnout
- How to Support Employees with PTSD at Work

These phrases remind employees that feedback is intended to support development, not diminish their

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Helpful Mindsets When Giving Feedback

Managers can keep feedback constructive by focusing on a few guiding principles:

- **Stay Specific:** Focus on observable moments rather than general patterns.
- **Stay Curious:** Assume there may be context you do not yet understand.
- **Focus on Behavior, Not Character:** Address actions rather than making assumptions about intent.

Even small shifts in tone can help feedback feel like **collaboration rather than correction.**

Responding to Personal Disclosures

When employees share personal challenges, your role is to listen, validate, and support; not solve.
Example Script:

- Stay Specific: Focus on observable moments rather than general patterns.
- Stay Curious: Assume there may be context you do not yet understand.
- Focus on Behavior, Not Character: Address actions rather than making assumptions about intent.

These responses help employees feel heard while keeping the conversation grounded in support and care.

Ways Managers Can Offer Support

Managers can help by focusing on **workplace flexibility and available resources,** such as:

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Responding to Personal Disclosures - 2

- Adjusting timelines or workload where possible
- Helping prioritize responsibilities
- Encouraging use of PTO or wellness days
- Connecting employees with benefits or support programs
- Offering a follow-up check-in

Small adjustments can often make a meaningful difference.

Boundary Reminder

Managers play an important role in supporting employees, but they are not expected to act as counselors or clinicians.

✅ Managers should:

- Listen with empathy
- Validate the employee's experience
- Explore reasonable workplace adjustments
- Refer employees to appropriate support resources (HR, benefits, EAP, mental health services)

❌ Managers should not:

- Diagnose or attempt to treat mental health concerns
- Take on a counseling role
- Promise confidentiality beyond company policy
- Feel responsible for solving the entire situation alone

Maintaining clear boundaries helps ensure employees receive the right type of support.

De-escalating Conflict and Repair Work

Tension can arise in any workplace. What matters most is the ability to slow the moment down and move toward understanding.

When conversations become heated, a manager's tone can help shift the energy back toward collaboration.

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De-escalating Conflict and Repair Work - 2

When tension arises, slow the moment down:

- "Let's pause for a moment."
- "I want to make sure both perspectives are heard."
- "What's underneath this frustration?"

Helping teams move toward resolution:

When facilitating difficult conversations, it can help to guide employees toward a few questions:

- What happened from each person's perspective?
- What impact did the situation have?
- What would help move things forward constructively?

The goal is not to determine who is right, but to restore communication and mutual respect.

Repair work after difficult moments:

Even experienced managers sometimes respond too quickly or miss an opportunity to show empathy. What strengthens trust is the ability to repair the moment openly.
Repair conversations model accountability and emotional maturity for the team.

Repair scripts:

- "I realized I responded quickly earlier."
- "That may have felt dismissive."
- "I appreciate you bringing this up."
- "I'd like to reset. Can we revisit the conversation?"

A simple acknowledgment can go a long way in rebuilding connection and demonstrating that growth is valued at every level of leadership.

Additional resources:

- Workplace Conflict Resolution Guide
- Navigating Workplace Relationships: Managing Conflict, Boundaries, and Communication
- Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication in the Workplace
- How to Stop and Prevent Aggression in the Workplace

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Weaving Mental Health Into Team Culture

Mental health support is reinforced through everyday team interactions, not just formal initiatives. When managers acknowledge energy, capacity, and well-being regularly, it creates space for openness and balance.

- Guide to Shifting Company Culture to Prioritize Mental Health
- Calendar Events Template for Cultivating Company Culture
- Playbook for Effective Team Building Activities
- Guide for Cultivating a Sense of Camaraderie in a Remote Setting

Normalizing Mental Health in Group Settings

Team meetings are one of the easiest places to reinforce a supportive culture. A brief moment to acknowledge energy levels or workload can help teams stay aware of capacity and encourage openness.

These check-ins do not need to be heavy or overly personal. The goal is simply to create space for awareness and connection.

Simple Team Check-Ins

Managers can open meetings with short, optional prompts such as:

- "Before we jump in, how's everyone's energy this week?"
- "What's one word for how your week is going so far?"
- "Anything we should be mindful of as we plan priorities today?"

These questions help teams recognize that **how people are doing matters,** not just what they are doing.

Bringing Capacity Into Planning Conversations

Workload discussions are another opportunity to reinforce psychological safety. When assigning work, acknowledging capacity helps employees feel comfortable raising concerns early.

Examples:

- "Let's be mindful of capacity as we assign this."
- "If this timeline feels tight, let's talk about what support might help."
- "Let's check what's already on everyone's plate before we add more."

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Normalizing Mental Health in Group Settings - 2

These moments encourage thoughtful prioritization and reduce the pressure to silently absorb more work.

Preventative Mental Health Practices

Proactive support helps employees stay well, not just recover when overwhelmed.

- **Encourage Time Off Early:** Normalize PTO as a proactive, healthy choice.
- **Support Boundaries**: Respect time off and reinforce clear work hours.
- **Avoid Glorifying Overwork:** Recognize sustainable effort, not burnout.
- **Set Clear Expectations:** Reduce stress through clarity and realistic timelines.
- **Create Space for Check-Ins:** Simple questions can surface challenges early.
- **Lead by Example:** Model balance, boundaries, and well-being.

Crisis Escalation Guidelines

Managers are not expected to handle crises alone, but they play a key role in recognizing and responding with care.

Recognize When Immediate Support May Be Needed

Certain statements or behaviors may signal that an employee is experiencing a mental health crisis. Pay particular attention if an employee:

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Recognize When Immediate Support May Be Needed - 2

- Mentions self-harm or thoughts of suicide
- Expresses deep hopelessness or feeling like things will never improve
- Shows visible, severe distress that interferes with their ability to function

These situations should be treated with urgency and care. The goal is not to solve the situation alone, but to help ensure the employee is connected with appropriate support.

Be Present and Listen with Care

If an employee shares that they are struggling, your first response should focus on being present and supportive. Give them your attention and allow them to speak without interruption or judgment. Simple, compassionate responses can help the employee feel heard:

- "I'm really glad you told me."
- "I'm sorry you're going through this."
- "You don't have to handle this alone."

Staying calm and grounded helps create a sense of safety in the conversation.

Express Concern Clearly

It is appropriate to acknowledge when you are concerned about their well-being. Naming the concern directly can help the employee understand that support is available.
Example Scripts:

- "I'm concerned about you and want to make sure you get the support you deserve."
- "Your well-being matters, and there are resources that can help."

This reinforces that seeking help is a positive and supported step.

Connect Them to the Right Resources

Managers should help guide employees toward appropriate support systems. Depending on your organization's policies, this may include:

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Be Present and Listen with Care - 2

If possible, help make the connection rather than simply suggesting it. Offering to share contact information, assist with the next step, or help them reach out can make accessing support feel more manageable.

Follow Internal Protocols

After ensuring the employee is connected to support, follow your organization's established escalation procedures. This may involve notifying Human Resources or another designated support team according to company policy.

These processes exist to ensure employees receive the appropriate level of care and follow-up support. If your organization does not have an internal protocol, you can use Tava's Crisis Support Template to develop one. Tava also has a resource to help with this process called "Crafting an Effective Crisis Support Plan: Essential Templates and Checklists for HR Leaders."

When someone is in crisis, the most important role a manager can play is to respond with empathy and guide them toward help. Listening, expressing genuine concern, and connecting employees with the right resources can help ensure they are supported during a difficult moment.

Taking thoughtful, timely action reinforces a culture where employees know their well-being matters and that help is available when they need it most.