

# *Social engagement at work is more relevant than ever*

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While working with my colleague Jeff Pfeffer, I was alarmed to find data saying that more than half our private sector employees in India suffer from depression, anxiety and stress. Then I found a survey that had nearly 80% of them admitting increased stress ever since the covid outbreak. We have all experienced some of this: a work-from-home-induced blurring of work/life, ambiguity in performance indicators, anxiety over finances, and an 'always on' mobile phone for one's boss to call. Add to that sleep apnea, relationship issues, unhealthy eating habits, lack of exercise, and monthly loan repayment pressure.

Management toxicity is affecting more and more Indians, who are already prone to cardiovascular ailments and diabetes.

We've found that employers who attract, retain and motivate a productive workforce, keeping employees physically and mentally healthy, don't do so by offering cute amenities such as free food or sleep pods, or a dog

crèche, etc. Rather, what employees need are less stressful work environments.

Research suggests that close relationships with family and friends can buffer the effects of psychosocial stress. Those who are less socially integrated seem more vulnerable to illness and show a higher mortality rate. A major survey of over 200,000 people found that over 75% have no reliable friend at work. This raises the question of how companies can promote a culture of strong interpersonal relationships and social support.

Yet, many of my C-Suite colleagues vehemently support a ban on social-media access at work. Their reasons range from security threats, lower productivity, political and religious acrimony, and bandwidth clog-ups. But the truth is that most of us cannot keep our fingers off random WhatsApp gossip while at work. Want data? About 77% of employees use social media at work.

Allowing employees access to Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, etc., is beneficial in many ways: An occasional break for the mind aids productivity; professional networking internally and externally can be helpful to both business and personal progress; it may encourage seeking answers and resolving business issues quicker; and it

can forge stronger bonds with co-workers.

Good employers aim for harmony among and mental peace for their employees. It helps to deploy a sense of community within the organization. Cohesion ups morale and enhances productivity, as workers try to deliver their best efforts. They are also more likely to stay with the company longer, even if their emoluments are cut. To achieve this, I propose the following:

One, take a relook at your corporate vision with ample inputs from employees—even if the chief executive thinks it's already great. The exercise will earn the respect of every employee. Ask people at every level to participate. A driver or security guard also counts as human capital.

Two, ensure that employees at all levels comply with your corporate policy. No one should be seen as being above the rules—not even the chairperson. When rules are bent for

some positions, dissonance raises its head in various parts of the organisation, which results in workplace disharmony. People feel valued only if the same rules apply to all.

Three, bring as much diversity as possible into the organization. Not just nominal representations along fashionable themes that can be seen through as PR gimmicks. Nice campus-recruitment posters are not nearly enough. Not only should you recruit people of all castes and religions, but also make sure they feel respected, especially in the current



## QUICK READ

One can't help but be alarmed by the large proportion of private sector employees found to be under stress and anxiety in India. Studies show that many have even slipped into depression.

Social engagement at work is essential in tough times, so let's allow the use of social media even as we foster diversity, the free exchange of ideas and other things that could keep spirits up.

political climate. Train people against biases, and ensure zero tolerance of hate or offensive comments or behaviour. As Unilever and IBM have done, constitute a diversity directorate. Conduct training at every level and also social events that embrace diverse cultures in fun settings.

Four, let people speak their minds without fear of consequences. Managers must encourage sub-

ordinates to open up and share their frustrations at work. Take complaints seriously and have a whistleblower system that's seen as more than a mere formality. Those who needlessly spread vibes of discontent should be either brought around or eased out. It may be a good idea to reward consistent productivity by employees and teams.

Five, constitute an employee recognition programme that honours those who live up to corporate values. The promotion of internal candidates to higher positions would also help consolidate a firm's value system. The Tata Group paid a price for its breach of this principle when a bunch of non-Tata folks took over key positions about half a decade ago. It has reverted to its norm since.

Six, encourage employees to align what they see as their life's purpose with that of the community, to the extent possible. As one of my batch mates says, it is important to drive this purpose for people to achieve a good work-life balance and for the firm to achieve harmony. If human capital is vital for your organisation, as it should be, then nurture and align it with your enterprise strategy and vision. Those whose values and purpose match those of their employers' will stay happier and perform much better.