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The role of compliance in workplace mental health

by Gerry Zack

For inspiration in writing this month's column, I looked no further than my own colleague, Adam Turteltaub, SCCE & HCCA's chief engagement and strategy officer, who wrote a piece for the Society of Corporate Compliance and Ethic's blog about new guidance on workplace mental health and well-being issued by the U.S. Surgeon General. I'd like to drill down on a couple of the Surgeon General's points that have relevance for compliance professionals.

The guidance describes five essential elements for workplace mental health and well-being:^[1]

- Protection from harm
- Connection and community
- Work/life harmony
- Mattering at work
- Opportunity for growth

Underlying each element are several components. Like so many frameworks, successfully following this guidance requires collaboration among multiple departments, such as human resources and others. But the issue of culture comes up repeatedly throughout all five components. And culture is an area in which compliance professionals can have a direct impact.

For instance, one component mentioned under "protection from harm" in the guidance is operationalizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility norms, policies, and programs. Compliance professionals can contribute to this by making compliance training and policies more accessible for individuals with visual or hearing impairments, or by offering multiple languages. The list of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access considerations for compliance professionals in managing a compliance program is a lengthy one.

Another component—this one underlying work/life harmony—is for employers to provide more autonomy over how work is done. This scares some compliance professionals, but it shouldn't. They don't mean autonomy over whether to comply with laws, or even whether to comply with policies. But compliance professionals should always have a mindset of working with business units to develop processes that comply with laws and regulations but are also efficient. Listening to input from employees is an important consideration in developing processes and policies that are both compliant and operationally efficient.

In a related matter, one of the components under “mattering at work” is to engage workers in workplace decisions. When compliance, or business unit managers, make decisions without input from workers, resentment and dissent can easily creep in. Obviously, compliance professionals always have to keep the critical goal of complying with laws and regulations as their primary focus but helping to establish paths to compliance that engage workers and create efficiencies puts compliance in a position of creating internal value.

¹ Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, *The U.S. Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being*, 2022, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>.

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