LEADING IN A MENTALLY HEALTHY WAY

A human-first guide for leaders who want performance that lasts

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MENTAL HEALTH IS NOT A SIDE ISSUE

Many leaders think of mental health as something separate from the work. Important, yes, but something for HR, benefits programs or the occasional wellness day.

In reality, mental health sits underneath almost everything we ask people to do at work.

Attention. Decision-making. Perception. Memory. Problem-solving. Focus. The ability to manage emotions in a tense meeting. Every one of these depends on how a person is doing. When mental health suffers, these are the skills that slip first, often long before anyone says a word.

You cannot have sustainable high performance without it.

That does not mean leaders need to become therapists. It means recognizing that how you lead shapes how your people are doing, and how your people are doing shapes how they perform.

Leading in a mentally healthy way is not about being soft. It is about being human-first: seeing the person before the task and building an environment where people can do their best work again and again.

1. GET TO KNOW THE HUMAN

Every person on your team arrives with a history, a set of expectations, a current reality and hopes for the future. The better you know those, the better you can lead them.

Most leaders know their people's roles, results and skills. Fewer know how those same people handle pressure, how they prefer to be led or what they are hoping their career becomes.

Consider getting to know six areas:

Who they are. What matters to them outside of work? What is going on in their life right now?

Their career history. What experiences, good and bad, have shaped how they work and how they see leaders?

How they manage pressure. What does stress look like for them? What helps them reset?

How they want to be led. How do they like to receive feedback, direction and recognition? How do they learn best?

Strengths and areas to grow. Where do they shine? Where do they want to develop?

Goals and dreams. What do they want in the next few months? In the next few years?

These are not one-time questions for an onboarding form. They are ongoing conversations. People change, and so do their circumstances.

2. UNDERSTAND THAT PRESSURE LANDS DIFFERENTLY

Two people can face the same deadline, the same reorganization or the same difficult client and have very different responses.

The stress-vulnerability model in psychology helps explain why. Each of us carries a different level of vulnerability, shaped by genetics, history, health and life circumstances. When the stress we face pushes past what we can absorb, our mental health begins to suffer. The same load that one person handles easily may tip another into struggle.

It also helps to remember that the brain is an old model. It reacts to a tense meeting, an overflowing inbox or a critical email with many of the same systems it once used for physical danger. Racing heart, narrowed focus and the urge to fight, flee or freeze are not signs of weakness. They are the brain trying to protect us.

For leaders, this means:

- Do not assume that what feels manageable to you feels manageable to everyone.
- Pay attention to the total load people are carrying, at work and outside of it.
- Notice changes from someone's usual way of being. That is often the earliest sign that the load is getting too heavy.

3. BALANCE CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

Resilience is not just a personal trait. It is shaped by the environment around us.

Research by David Fletcher and Mustafa Sarkar on resilience in high-performance settings describes environments in terms of two things leaders' control: how much challenge people face and how much support they receive.

	LOW SUPPORT	HIGH SUPPORT
HIGH CHALLENGE	**UNRELENTING** High pressure with little backing. People burn out, disengage or leave.	**FACILITATIVE** High expectations with real support. People grow, stretch and recover.
LOW CHALLENGE	**STAGNANT** Little is expected and little is offered. People coast or check out.	**COMFORTABLE** Plenty of support, but little stretch. People feel good but stop growing.

The goal is the facilitative environment: high challenge **and** high support.

Mentally healthy leadership is not about lowering expectations. Often, the healthiest thing a leader can do is hold a high bar while making sure people have what they need to reach it.

Where does your team sit right now? What would it take to move one step closer to facilitative?

4. USE A HUMAN-FIRST TOOLKIT

Mentally healthy leadership shows up in everyday moments, not just in crisis conversations. These are some of the most useful tools.

Start where they are. Before a one-on-one or a big project kickoff, ask: *Where is this person at today? What does that mean for today? How can I support them in being their best?*

Think beyond the task. Beyond the skills and the deliverables, what are you trying to build in your people? What values do you want them to carry? How are you creating space for that on purpose?

Listen for the "shoulds." Many high performers carry heavy expectations of themselves. *I should have known. I should be further along. I shouldn't need help.* Notice where those expectations come from, and how your own language might feed them.

Build trust in themselves. Help people move from *What can I control?* to *What do I know?* to *How can I adapt?* Confidence grows when people see that they can handle what comes, not just what they planned for.

Help people know where to focus. In busy, ambiguous work, people burn energy trying to pay attention to everything. Be clear about what matters most right now, and what can wait.

Normalize the reset. Things will not always go as planned. Talk openly about what people can do when a meeting goes sideways or a mistake happens, and how to get back to their best. A short pause, a walk or a few slow breaths can be a legitimate part of the workday.

Accept all parts of the journey. There will be weeks when people are not where they want to be emotionally. The question is not how to make those weeks disappear, but how to get consistent effort without adding judgement.

Do what the conditions require. Sometimes people need to lower the bar for a day, ask for help or adjust a plan. Treat that as smart preparation, not failure. It does not need to be a big deal.

Debrief the human, not just the work. After a big project or a hard stretch, review both the technical lessons and the human ones. How did people manage the pressure? What helped? What would you do differently to support each other?

5. MANAGE YOURSELF FIRST

In every conversation, there is what you bring, what they bring and the experience you create together.

What you bring matters more than most leaders realize. Your history, your comfort with hard conversations, your energy that day and your values all shape how a conversation lands.

Before a difficult conversation, check in with yourself:

- What is my comfort level with this kind of conversation?
- What do I have capacity for today?
- Do I need to calm myself before or during it?
- How do I want this person to feel when they leave?
- How will I take care of myself afterwards?

If a conversation is not going where you hoped, pause and ask:

- Do I need to take more control, or give some up?
- Do I need to speed up, or slow down?
- Do I need to listen more, or share my own view?
- Do I need to be more flexible, or hold steady?

You do not have to have all the answers. Saying *"I'm not sure how best to support you, but I want to figure it out with you"* is often more powerful than a perfect solution.

6. WHEN THE PUSHBACK IS ABOUT YOU

One of the hardest moments for any leader is when someone tells you that *you* are part of the problem.

The natural reaction is to defend or explain. But if the goal is a relationship where people can be honest, it helps to slow down and use a few simple skills drawn from psychiatrist David Burns' work on effective communication:

Disarming. Find the truth in what they are saying, even if you do not fully agree.

"I feel" statements. Share your own experience honestly, without blame.

Positive respect. Say something genuine that shows you value the person and the courage it took to speak up.

Here is how that might sound if someone says, *"You're being way too hard on me"*:

> *"You're right, I do have high expectations of you. I hear that you're feeling a lot of pressure, and I appreciate how hard it is to tell me that. I feel badly that it's landing this way, because I want to support you in reaching your goals. It sounds like I haven't been helping in a way that feels good. Can you tell me more about what would be helpful right now?"*

That response does not lower the bar. It keeps the relationship strong enough for the bar to mean something.

A SIMPLE LEADER CHECK-IN

This week, ask yourself:

- How well do I know the people I lead, beyond their roles and results?
- Is anyone carrying more right now than I realize?
- Is my team in a facilitative environment, or drifting toward unrelenting, comfortable or stagnant?
- What "shoulds" might I be feeding without meaning to?
- What am I bringing into my conversations this week?

THE TAKEAWAY

Plants need both sun and rain to grow.

People need both challenge and support. They need leaders who expect a lot of them, and who also see them as humans first.

Leading in a mentally healthy way is not a program or a policy. It is a set of everyday choices: getting to know your people, noticing how pressure lands, balancing challenge with support, using a human-first toolkit and managing yourself so you can show up well for others.

When people feel seen and supported, they do not just feel better. They think more clearly, decide more wisely and perform more consistently.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

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QUICK GUIDE: LEADING HUMAN-FIRST

Six everyday practices for leading in a mentally healthy way

1. Get to know the human

- Who they are, career history, how they handle pressure
- How they want to be led, strengths and growth areas, goals
- Keep the conversation going as circumstances change

2. Remember pressure lands differently

- Notice the total load, at work and outside of it
- Watch for changes from someone's usual way of being

3. Balance challenge and support

- Aim for facilitative: high challenge and high support
- Hold a high bar and give people what they need to reach it

4. Use the human-first toolkit

- Start where they are today
- Listen for the "shoulds"
- Build trust: control, then know, then adapt
- Be clear about where to focus
- Normalize the reset
- Debrief the human, not just the work

5. Manage yourself first

- Check your comfort, capacity and calm before hard conversations
- Adjust as you go: control, pace, listening, flexibility
- You do not need all the answers

6. When the pushback is about you

- Disarm: find the truth in it
- Share how you feel, without blame
- Show respect for their courage
- Ask what would help

Plants need both sun and rain to grow.