Creating an Employee Resource group for Mental Health

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are an effective tool for personal and professional development and to create support networks to enhance employee satisfaction and engagement at work. ERGs are also an underutilized mechanism for promoting mental health in the workplace. Most notably, ERGs can provide key educational guidance for group members on mental health conditions, facilitate open dialogue in a safe space, reduce stigma, promote support and help-seeking behaviors, and sustain a culture of workplace mental well-being.

Steps for establishing and sustaining an ERG for mental health

Step 1: Identify the core objective and develop an action plan

What are the purpose and goals of the group? Detail how the group can positively impact the company and develop a compelling argument about how it aligns with organizational mission/values.

One target objective should be to help facilitate skill development, such as stress-coping, resiliency, mindfulness, and more through workshops and information sessions. It is very helpful to have a few members with lived experiences with mental health (self or as a caregiver) that can help assist and direct other members to the appropriate resources. Lastly, choose a name for the ERG using soft language that empowers and aligns with organizational culture.

Step 2: Provide structure to formalize ERG processes

Develop a plan of action for the first year that includes organizational structure, leadership roles and responsibilities, meeting times and locations, meeting agendas, recruitment/marketing plan, and any planned events or initiatives. Set up a formal structure for roles and responsibilities. Establish a basic meeting agenda with specific items and time. Draft a well-defined membership recruitment plan (e.g. posters in common areas, sharing through word-of-mouth, organization-wide email, table at benefits fair, and other means). Plan a few fun and meaningful events to help engage members and include opportunities for mentorship, and personal and professional development. Examples of activities may include: workshops on mindfulness, meditation, yoga, resiliency, gratitude, active listening; educational seminars on self-care, symptom awareness, and available organizational resources and benefits for mental health.

Step 3: Gain organizational support

Before you begin, gain organizational buy-in and support. To do so, provide leadership with a compelling rationale outlining the need for an ERG for mental health and its benefit to the organization. A key component for establishing an ERG is to gain commitment from an executive sponsor that advocates for the group, shares information on group activities with management, monitors progress, and guides group development. Identify people passionate about mental health and enlist their help.

Step 4: Kickstarting the group

This step focuses on advertising and gaining momentum to help facilitate ERG success. Do not try to 'drink the ocean' by putting every idea in place at once. Start small, spread the word through networking, advertise through intranet documents or organizational newsletters, or ask your executive sponsor if you can send out a department- or company-wide email about the group. Leverage multiple communication channels to optimize outreach.

An essential element of ERGs is its inclusivity. Be sure to emphasize that it is voluntary and open to anyone who wants to join. Also, make sure that you describe meetings as safe places to learn more about mental health from both personal and caregiver perspectives. Psychological safety can play a big role in making your ERG group successful. Highlight that group membership does not mean that you have a mental health condition. To facilitate group communication, set up a free Slack channel – or other team communication tools - where members can share news, articles, or offer support. The virtual element can help with individuals who may be uncomfortable meeting live.

Step 5: Measure ERG effectiveness to optimize effectiveness

To ensure and sustain group effectiveness, decide on quantitative measures of success. This step shows leadership the importance and value of the ERG. In addition, this step helps the group stay accountable, working towards and fulfilling their objectives. Some example metrics include: ERG membership numbers, meeting and event attendance, number of events hosted, and annual surveys that provide constructive feedback to the ERG leadership on how to improve meetings and group effectiveness.

For more on ERGs, check out the links below:

Mind Share's How to Create an Employee Resource Group for Mental Health:
https://mindsharepartners.lpages.co/erg/

NASA article on ERG guidance: https://www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/erg_guidance_7-17-13.pdf

Cisco resource guide for developing and sustaining ERGs:
https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/about/ac49/ac55/docs/RESOURCE_GUIDE_external11_2010.pdf

Boston College on ERG:
https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/research/publications/executivebriefingseries/Executive%20Briefing_PPT_Employee%20Resource%20Groups

Yourcause.com ERG guidance: https://solutions.yourcause.com/start-employee-resource-group/