Mental Health Wellbeing at Work

Podcast/Webinar transcript prepared for XpertHR by Callisto Connect.

Noelle Murphy:	Hello, and welcome to the XpertHR podcast. My name is Noelle Murphy, and today I'm delighted to be joined today by Uxshely Carcamo to talk about creating a working environment for good mental health. Uxshely is a lawyer, psychotherapist and registered nutritionist, and focuses on empowering others to improve and manage their mental and physical health. We're very lucky that she's also an author for us here at XpertHR, and has written our line manager briefing on creating a working environment for good mental health. Through her work with the food therapy clinic which she founded, she believes that every individual can thrive psychologically and physically when given the right tools, knowledge and support, and also when they feel understood, valued and listened to.
	Uxshely, HR have been really clear with us on the importance of wellbeing among employees, now more than ever given the past two years. From the work you've been doing, what impact has the pandemic and all the associated restrictions had on people's mental health? [0:01:18.0]
Uxshely Carcamo:	Well one thing that's clear is that the pandemic has certainly has an impact on people's mental health. I remember right at the start of the pandemic seeing a quote which said that we're all in the same storm but we're in different boats, and I think that has really been the case, and that's something that I've certainly seen working with people one-on-one and also working with organisations, that individuals' life circumstances have really dictated how they've fared through the pandemic. So there are certain groups that have been much more vulnerable to experience poor mental health, and they're individuals that perhaps were living by themselves, or perhaps individuals that were single parents. There are certain groups that have suffered more, dealt with loss, dealt with difficult circumstances, financial insecurity, and those groups understandably have experienced low mood and anxiety. All of us in general are likely to have experienced heightened levels of anxiety just because there's been so much change and there's been so much uncertainty.
	But I think what's helpful to also point out is that some people's mental health has actually thrived through the pandemic. And I've seen that for certain individuals, the pandemic's really represented an opportunity for them to reconnect with their family, for them to develop a new work-life balance and find new ways of working.

So I think there's certainly been implications for people's mental health, but whether that's been positive implications or negative implications has depended a lot on people's individual circumstances.

Noelle Murphy: When we look specifically at mental wellbeing in the workplace, there can still be a misconception that mental wellbeing is actually mental ill health, can't there, which can sometimes be a barrier to actually creating a working environment that really supports and facilitates good mental health? [0:03:16.8]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah. I've certainly seen that to be the case. When I've run training sessions and workshops in organisations, and the title of the session has been something like *Unpacking Mental Health* or *Understanding Mental Health*, a lot of people have fed back to me that actually they've been reluctant to come to the sessions or to participate in the sessions because, 'Oh you know, mental health, that's not something that affects me.' And of course, in saying that they're equating mental health, those two words, with mental illness, and thinking mental health just describes things like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, when actually mental health is just like physical health. Mental health is a spectrum, just like our physical health. There'll be times in our life when we'll be physically well, doing really well, and other times maybe where we're suffering with a cold or another illness where physically we're not doing so well. In the same way, mental health describes moments in our lives where we're thriving psychologically, we're happy, we're content, we have meaningful relationships, but other times, depending on what we've gone through, we can be feeling low and anxious and down, and that's completely normal and natural. And I think the more we can do to normalise the fact that mental health also involves mental wellbeing, where people are thriving, where people feel a sense of purpose, a sense of connection, the more we'll engage different people on this topic of mental health.

Noelle Murphy: And that's such a powerful way, really, of framing it, in terms of there being a spectrum and if we look at periods of our lives where our physical health mightn't have been brilliant, the same can apply to mental health. And it's a really positive and empowering way to actually look at it, and something that will really work towards breaking down the stigma around mental health and having a really truly open conversation about it.

I suppose when we look at the role that people managers have to play, particularly we know that the impact of work and the workplace on employee mental wellbeing, that can be significant. But we know that people managers don't always have the skills they need to do so, to create an environment to encourage positive mental wellbeing. What would you say are the key skills that line managers really need to have in place? [0:05:40.1]

Uxshely Carcamo: I think you're so right in that line managers play a really key, fundamental role in the mental health and wellbeing of their teams. Often an individual's experience of the workplace is very heavily shaped by the practices, the culture, the way that that line manager leads the team, so I think focusing on line managers and boosting wellbeing in the workplace is really great, a really important step.

I think in terms of the skills that line managers need in order to promote positive wellbeing, firstly listening skills. And as a therapist a lot of my role is to listen to individuals. And of course we're not trying to make line managers therapists but at the same time, by listening to individuals they can really make individuals in their team feel supported, really gain feedback as to what they need in order to thrive psychologically, ensure that working practices and the working culture are conducive to positive mental wellbeing. I think it's through listening to individuals that line managers can really ensure that their team is really getting the support that they need.

Also, I guess, building those emotional intelligence skills or those soft skills – empathising, being caring. Often in the workplace there's a lot of focus on intelligence and competition, and there's less of a focus on some of those softer skills, putting yourself in other people's shoes, really trying to see things from their perspective. But all of those softer skills, that emotional intelligence, empathising, they're all so key to protecting the mental health of individuals.

Noelle Murphy: I often think it's a bit of a misnomer, you know, the way we talk about soft skills, and actually they're really quite difficult to put in place and to use consistently, aren't they? [0:07:33.6]

Uxshely Carcamo: Most definitely. And what I'm always amazed at is that we have so much training, through school, university and things like writing, reading, interpreting literature, all of these kind of things, but we don't get any training really, or much training, on listening skills. And actually, they're one of the most fundamental skills that create that supportive, caring environment. These are difficult skills to develop, especially since a lot of people are not given the training in them, effectively.

Noelle Murphy: And you know, when we look at the role of line managers, so for example now there are people who may be coming back to the workplace, or have always been in the workplace, but people managers' roles in supporting and creating a good mental wellbeing environment is just as significant when employees are based remotely, aren't they? [0:08:32.0]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah, mostly definitely. In fact, I would say potentially even more important because when individuals are in the same space physically it's much easier to pick on cues that perhaps someone's struggling. It's much easier to gauge how

individuals are doing and their workload, their work demands, their work pressures, stress levels, whereas when actually someone's working remotely you really have to proactively check in with them, proactively engage with them in order to get a sense of how they're feeling, how they're doing. And you know, employees can much more easily become disengaged, disconnected because they're not seeing the line manager or the other team members as frequently.

Now don't get me wrong, I really do think these new ways of working and hybrid working, they're amazing in that they allow people to achieve more of a work-life balance, they promote diversity and inclusion because, for example, introverts will probably thrive having some time to work from home. So they're really, really beneficial, but there is that danger that people could lose the connection with their team. So I think ensuring that line managers check in frequently and are proactive about ensuring that they're staying in touch with people that are working remotely and seeing how they're doing, it's really important.

Noelle Murphy: It's really about being proactive, isn't it, rather than reactive? So when you don't have somebody in your sight line in a physical sense, you really have to be mindful and proactive about those check-ins and really hone in your listening skills. [0:10:08.8]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah, most definitely. And finding ways of having those check-ins that work for the line managers but also work for the employee. I think this is where listening skills are so important 'cause every employee, every individual is really different in terms of their preferences for management styles. Some people love being micromanaged whereas others tend to be much more self-sufficient and prefer having that independence. So where a manager can listen to their team's preferences around this, they can really adapt their management style to accommodate those preferences.

Another thing I think too, to be conscious of, where some employees are working remotely and some are in the office, is that something called 'proximity bias' can come up, and this is where inadvertently or subconsciously, without intending to, the line manager starts to favour those that are physically present in the office just because, you know, we naturally do that. If you see people day to day they're going to be top of mind and they might get prioritised in terms of projects or even promotions. So I think just line managers being conscious of the fact that just because they can't see some people it doesn't mean that they're not there and willing to work on projects or go for those promotions too. I think that's another thing to bear in mind as well.

Noelle Murphy: And you referenced hybrid working and indeed the benefits that it can provide to everybody. And this represents really the biggest change we'll

probably ever see to our working lives, but it is commonplace now in a lot of organisations. But in terms of mental health for those working under a hybrid model, it can present both challenges and opportunities, can't it? And if we look just at the challenges, what would you say they are, and particularly how people managers and HR can go about resolving or mitigating them? [0:12:04.5]

Uxshely Carcamo: Sure. So it's a really good question. Now I think we know that the workplace is actually really, really positive for mental health and mental wellbeing. The workplace provides a source of purpose, a source of connection and community. So there are lots of positives that can come from the working environment which are at danger of being lost when people are working remotely.

For example, the team represents that community, that connection. And actually, if you're working from home you may not be connecting with those individuals as much, you may not have that closeness. So I think some of the challenges will be in ensuring that there is still that same culture, there is still that same connection amongst team members, and that people do feel bought into the broader purpose of an organisation, despite not being physically present somewhere. So I think that's something that HR teams and managers will have to work to try and ensure that there's a way of ensuring that culture is still there, the connection is still there.

And ways of going about doing that could mean just encouraging people to come in on the same day each week, so that they're still seeing all of their teams, or creating opportunities for social gatherings. Just things that ensure that people are still meeting at least sometimes and still connecting, even if that's via a video conference remotely here and there.

And also ensuring that those cultures and those values, they're still present and still there, even whilst people are working remotely. I think that will be another key thing to focus on too.

Noelle Murphy: And would you say that, you know, now that we're in this new environment there's also a certain amount of onus on those who are working remotely to be proactive in their own connections with their colleagues and with the rest of those within their department or function? [0:14:08.9]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah, most definitely I agree with you there. And I think that one of the amazing things about hybrid working is that it gives individuals that sense of autonomy and control over their working lives. And from all of the research that's been done around this, reports on what employees need in order to have positive mental health and wellbeing at work, one of the key things that always comes up is they want that autonomy or they want that sense of

control. So it's great that they can work from home and have that control over where they're working, perhaps even setting their schedule. But I think you're right that alongside that autonomy comes that obligation or responsibility to be proactive over their working lives and ensure that they're still connecting with others, they're still really bonding with others, they're seeking out their line manager for that support, for that mentoring.

The danger, I guess, and what I've seen a lot over the past year, is this sense of…I want to say fatigue. It's almost this resistance to re-engaging or going back into the workforce. The thing about isolation is that when we are isolated or we're by ourselves a lot more we naturally tend to feel lower, we tend to have a lower mood. What we tend to then want to do is to isolate ourselves, and I'm hearing a lot of clients and people I work with one-on-one saying, 'I could go into the office but also I just don't want to. I could just stay at home and get a bit more of a life-in and keep wearing my comfortable clothes. I just don't want to.' So I think people need to be conscious of the fact that there is also likely to be a bit of that resistance there, or that resistance present, because when we've spent a lot of time isolating ourselves or secluding ourselves, actually that can make us want to just do that even more, even though our mental health would benefit from going into the office, meeting people, doing things again.

Noelle Murphy: And you know, we also have heard from HR that those who are reluctant to return to the workplace, it's a challenge. I mean, it's a huge question, but do you have any words of advice or any particular areas that HR can begin to focus on to really try to encourage those back to the workplace? [0:16:32.8]

Uxshely Carcamo: I think giving people a sense of autonomy or flexibility around the decision to return to the workplace can really help. So for example, suggesting, 'We'd encourage you to come in two days a week but you can choose the day that works for you,' so that they still retain that sense of autonomy or control. Or perhaps initially at least providing the opportunity to come in for half a day or perhaps start the day slightly later and finish the day slightly earlier, to gently allow people to ease their way back into the office. 'Cause what I'm hearing is that people feel really resistant to do it, really resistant to go in, but the moment they do, and once they've done so, they feel so much better. They've maintained those connections, they've had a good time with their colleagues, and they're really grateful that they've done that. So I think anything that HR teams can create that allows people to ease back into going back into the office, I think that will really help that process.

Noelle Murphy: I mean, I think the key there is, as you mentioned, giving employees that sense of autonomy around their return to the workplace, on the understanding that the workplace will be visited at some point or other, it

really will transform relationships across the board, and the relationship between people managers and employees as well. [0:17:55.0]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah, most definitely. And I think also presenting that more as an opportunity for employees, rather than something that they have to do. So for example, 'You can come into the office because it represents an opportunity for you to connect with your colleagues and go to this event that we've planned for you,' or, 'It allows you to be mentored by this team member,' really representing that this an opportunity for you to develop, further your career, get that sense of purpose and connection, rather than it representing something that has to be stressful and that's being forced upon these employees in quite a negative way.

Noelle Murphy: Really good advice there. Uxshely, when we talk about people managers, we talked a lot in the podcast today about what they need to do to support others. But people managers really need to be mindful of themselves as well, don't they, and to be aware of their own mental wellbeing? And it's really important that this is acknowledged throughout organisations. Again it's a big question, but do you have any particular words of wisdom for this group? [0:19:03.7]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah. So I think you're completely right and it's a really important point, because actually to support, to mentor, to be that source of inspiration and motivation for others, it takes a lot out of you personally. And as a psychotherapist I personally, and other therapists, have to all have ongoing supervision and therapy ourselves, because really you're not in the best position to be there for and help and support other people unless you are in a good place yourself. So I think for line managers, absolutely the starting point should always be taking care of their own mental health and their own wellbeing. And also actually, interestingly, what I tend to notice when working with organisations is one of the most powerful things line managers can do in terms of influencing the mental health and wellbeing of their teams is actually role-modelling the behaviours that they want those in their teams to then engage in. So if the line manager is taking a regular lunch break, is taking afternoons off to go for a quick walk, doing those things to show that they're taking care of their own mental health and their own wellbeing, of course they'll feel better and they'll thrive psychologically and be able to perform at their best, but what that actually also does is give those in their teams permission to do the same, permission to take care of their own mental health so that they too can thrive.

So I think absolutely it's obviously important for line managers to take care of their mental health for themselves so that they're in that best position to support others, but also actually because doing so they'll role-model those behaviours for other people around them as well.

Noelle Murphy: And in doing so, that can again further break down a lot of the stigma around how it's okay to prioritise your mental health, just as it is to priories your physical health. [0:20:55.6]

Uxshely Carcamo: Yeah, most definitely. I think often people just need that bit of permission. They just need to know that it's okay for them to do that, and that has to come from the top, from the bosses, from the line managers. So I completely agree that that's all just part of normalising those conversations and allowing people to prioritise their mental wellbeing.

Noelle Murphy: Well thank you so much for your time today, Uxshely. You've covered so much there.

Uxshely Carcamo: Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

Noelle Murphy: Well that's all we have time for today, but before we go just a reminder that the line manager briefing written by Uxshely on creating a working environment for good mental health is available on our XpertHR site. Thanks for listening, and please do join us again next time.