



Celebrating people like Tom Creating an **inclusive work culture** for employees with **mental illness**

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Tom's story!:

"I have a mental illness known commonly as depression. I take medication (Prozac) which slows the re-absorption and extends my brain's serotonin bath. Consequently, I feel better.

I'm not weak or fragile. It's pure biochemistry.

I am neither proud nor ashamed that I am, by definition, mentally ill. What we ALL need to be concerned about is that unlike physical illness, mental illness continues to carry a stigma that leads many not to confront it... or talk about it... or ask about it."

Tom's thoughtful and heartfelt story resonates with those of us who have or know someone with a mental illness.

The stigma surrounding mental illnesses, compared to physical conditions, plagues our society and, in many cases, our work communities. According to one study, when asked to consider their comfort level in discussing their own mental health with friends, family and employers, people reported being mostly uncomfortable.

56% say they'd be uncomfortable talking to friends and family about it, and 84% say they'd be uncomfortable talking to their employer.ⁱⁱ

This must change.

Here's where Tom's story, to us, gets a bit more interesting—he is a recently retired salesperson and regional manager. This message was posted (with his permission) on the company intranet of his employer.

Tom concludes:

"PLEASE keep your senses tuned to your own feelings and into the comments and behaviors of those you love... and be proactive in asking them how they are feeling. With tele-therapy on the rise and (our) employee assistance program, it's never been easier to get help."

Tom was the exception to the rule—his workplace gave him a platform to tell his story and, importantly, feel fully included. Tom was successful because he could belong and knew his purpose. He was supported and part of an organization that valued him.

We were interested in an employer who would endorse Tom's message and post it on an all-company platform and it led us to ask...

How does company culture and how people feel about their work experience impact their mental (and physical) health?



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A group of researchers at the **University of Louisville** took on this question. In a recently published study in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, the research team showed that workplace culture – specifically, how someone feels like they belong, or how isolated they feel at work – could influence a biological response. Using catecholamines and their metabolites as biomarkers of sympathetic nervous system activity, the research team asked participants about their unique experiences of work and tracked their overall work experience.

It turns out, work and organizational culture has a significant impact on our physical and mental health. Those who worked in environments where they were engaged and part of a community were less likely to show biomarkers that influence heart disease, hypertension and depression, among other mental and physical challenges. But the opposite was also true. Participants who felt isolated, disconnected and disengaged showed increased and elevated levels of biomarkers that influenced physical and mental illness, both in the present moment as well as in the future.

A study conducted by McKinsey & Companyⁱⁱⁱ highlights yet another business issues—those who struggle with mental health and well-being challenges are more likely to look for another employer:

Employees facing mental-health and well-being challenges are **4x** more likely than others to want to leave their organizations

In a report published last year, the **U.S. Surgeon General** sees an opportunity to create workplaces that support the health and wellbeing of employees:

“When people thrive at work, they are more likely to feel physically and mentally healthy overall and to contribute positively to their workplace.

This creates both a responsibility and unique opportunity for leaders to create workplace environments that support the health and well-being of workers.”^{iv}

It seems, based on these results, culture can play a significant and important role in supporting employee health and wellbeing in measurable, tangible ways. What an uplifting and hopeful finding.

For the last decade BI WORLDWIDE has been studying the factors that create engaging, inspiring workplaces, using a model called



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“The New Rules of Engagement.” Here is a short description of the factors measured in the model:

new rules of engagement™

At BIWORLDWIDE, we define engagement as an employee's reciprocation of the work experience a company provides. If the experience is great, the employee will stay, work hard and be inspired to do better.

These Twelve New Rules of Engagement™ are what we have found best predict the outcomes companies are after: **commitment, effort and inspiration.**

We are able to call this model “the New Rules” year after year because we are constantly testing new ideas based on how work changes over time. Sometimes the changes are few and only lead to small adjustments for one rule or another. Other years, we see big changes at work and adjust the model accordingly.

Some of these practices have been around for decades, some are brand new and some are a re-magnifying of things we thought we already knew.

1. make it personal
More than ever, great managing is a matter of intense understanding of each unique individual — knowing their abilities, their aspirations and how they work best. Success on this rule is critical for achieving all the others.

2. make money a non-issue
Money isn't everything. It only gets you so far. But companies that mishandle this emotional area will make it a bigger deal than it has to be.

3. help them thrive
Never have work, personal life and health been so inextricably connected. Protecting employees' holistic wellbeing doesn't just reduce costs; it invigorates the employees and the business.

4. realize their potential
In lieu of permanent placements and pensions, employers are expected to provide growth opportunities. Offering tools, learning and development for employees to be successful will grow your top talent — and your bottom line.

5. foster belonging
Employees cannot fully connect to a company they do not feel a part of. Fostering a sense of belonging within the organization, the team and the work itself is critical for employees to stay and do exceptional work.

6. be boldly transparent
Gone are the days of top-down leadership. The best ideas may come from employees, so listen with an open mind and use those ideas to shape the vision for the future.

7. give it meaning
People need to be part of something bigger than just a job and a paycheck. Meaning drives higher performance.

8. see their future
What people do today is largely motivated by where they think it will take them in the future. Companies that are deliberate about helping employees chart that future will be rewarded with those people's best work.

9. magnify their success
What a company recognizes gets repeated. Making a big deal of employees' accomplishments ensures the victories will be multiplied.

10. unite them
People have always been willing to take one for the right team, but only if they feel others will do the same. With more people working remotely than ever before, it's never been more important to create conditions that foster strong collaboration.

11. let them lead
True empowerment is not just a place to voice ideas but having those ideas seriously considered. It's not just being told to take a risk but being supported when the risk does not go as planned. Empowering this way will ignite inspiration.

12. challenge them
Your best employees are eager to accomplish something incredible together. Challenge, rally and support them wholeheartedly and you'll be struck by what they can do.

commitment

effort

inspiration

In a study conducted last year to update the “New Rules” insights, a representative sample of employees across North America were asked if they felt their workplace supported a healthy lifestyle. Here’s a summary of what they felt their employer was delivering in terms of their employee experience that correlated with their feeling on whether their company supported a healthy lifestyle:

- Employees enjoy the work they do in a culture where they feel they can bring their “full self” to work.
- Their team is properly staffed, collaborative and has complementary skills and abilities.
- Employees receive meaningful training that helps them in their current role and prepares them for future growth opportunities.
- They can take the lead on an important project and have achieved success in attaining a goal they set.
- Employees are known, and listened to, by leadership, who helps them see how their work contributes to the mission of the organization.
- They can earn a variety of rewards that inspire them.



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Here are additional details, supported by the math behind the observations. According to BI WORLDWIDE's Research Director Rob Mezera:

- If employees agree that “My team’s skills and perspectives complement each other well,” they are **9x more likely** to agree their employer makes it easy to live a healthy lifestyle.
- We asked employees if they have received several different non-cash rewards—such as tickets to a concert or travel. When they had done a good job, and if they did receive one of these rewards, they were **2 to 5x more likely** to agree their employer makes it easy to live a healthy lifestyle.
- If employees agree they are “Reminded how the work you do makes an impact on your company’s mission,” they are **2.7x more likely** to agree their employer makes it easy to live a healthy lifestyle.
- If employees believe they sincerely enjoy the day-to-day tasks that my job requires, they are **6.7x more likely** to agree their employer makes it easy to live a healthy lifestyle.

Culture matters.

And a culture that values certain outcomes really matters.

We hope this provides a roadmap for employers to improve their “healthy lifestyle” culture. Culture matters in not only creating and sustaining a productive, inspiring workplace, but one where employees like Tom can showcase their talents and skills and, in doing so, meaningfully contribute.

The Toms of the world need us. And we desperately need the Toms of the world to bring all their gifts to work.

Let’s not let them down.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available.
Call or text 988 or chat www.988lifeline.org.

Visit our blog to read or share this article.

ⁱ This story is shared with the approval of the writer and has been edited for brevity.

ⁱⁱ The Stigma of Mental Illness, at: [Aware\(mentalhelp.net\)](http://Aware(mentalhelp.net))

ⁱⁱⁱ Full report at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-state-of-organizations-2023?cid=soc-web>

^{iv} The full report and recommendations at: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>

^v For a full presentation of insights, please contact Rob Mezera at rob.mezera@biworldwide.com