A Brief Study of the Impact of Language on Mental Health in the Workplace

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CONCEPT PAPER ON THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE ON MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

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A workplace, in this instance, is not confined to corporate environments, but is taken to be any and all places of work. This includes a work from home setup, in which the notion of workplace is construed out of the link between your work and your home, and a volunteering/non-for-profit setup.

The effect of language on mental health has been studied in a variety of contexts, such as between individuals in a relationship, in a school environment, and during the course of conversations. It has rarely been studied in a workplace environment though, and whether the concerned workplace is competitive or not, as listed below, there are a variety of effects such a context or location can have on an individual

- **Stress in an organization**
  - When organizations change, particularly when the changes are broad in reach and several changes occur simultaneously, results in increased stress-related prescriptions by employees. There may be many causes for increased stress levels, including perceived injustices or unfairness, lack of timely communication by management or fear of future changes.
  - Loss of loyalty when companies look to salaries and benefits as the first places to cut back when cost-saving is announced. When this happens, it is inevitable that some employees will leave the company to seek employment elsewhere. The employees that remain, whether they stay voluntarily or because they could not find employment elsewhere, are often resentful. Motivation decreases, taking job performance along with it. Employees lose company loyalty and may even become demotivated enough to purposefully sabotage the company.
  - Some organizations require major restructuring, resulting in sweeping life changes for a number of employees. Typical changes that negatively impact a portion of the employees are salary cuts, loss of benefits, downgrading in job position, job loss or relocation to another city, state or country. All of these can be devastating changes to employees, particularly those who are supporting families.
  - The best way to handle organization-related stress while keeping the language used in mind, is to communicate with all of the employees every step of the way and treat everyone with fairness and compassion by using words of encouragement and by being there for one another.

- **Technology**
  - Computers have transformed the workplace and society as a whole. People and organizations have become dependent on computers to connect them to coworkers, vendors, customers and information. Computers are used to track schedules, streamline information and provide needed data. Although computers have provided workers countless tools for business and easier access to information nearby or abroad, there are negative effects.
Communication Breakdowns - due to the prevalence of computers in the workplace, email is now a common mode of professional communication. This has caused a plethora of communication issues. Many employees lack comprehensive writing skills and can therefore struggle with successfully communicating messages. Yet, even the most-skilled writer can still have trouble with conveying tone in electronic messages. Therefore, without the use of inflection and body language, messages meant as neutral or even complimentary can be interpreted as rude or critical. To add to this, many workers are so dependent on email that they have not successfully built a physical relationship foundation via face time or phone calls.

Increased stress - learning new computer skills and programs can put stress on workers, especially older or less-educated workers. In addition to this, employees are constantly connected to co-workers, clients, vendors and business networks throughout the workday. Because interactions can happen instantaneously, often with a desire for instant responses, this can cause additional stress in the workplace.

Distractions - office workers are often interrupted by emails, instant messages, phone calls or other distractions. Aside from legitimate work-based interruptions, employers are also competing against technology-driven distractions such as social media, online games, and news feeds. This prevents them from focusing solely on the work at hand, and adds to the mental stress of employees.

Connectedness - collaborating and communicating via computers while keeping in mind the language used, and not only in person, can leave employees feeling connected to their peers and superiors.

- Health Issues
  - Aside from the widely-discussed vision and musculoskeletal problems, there might be an increased rate of heart-related disease in computer-based offices due to the intense pressure of having work constantly monitored via computer. There is also the possibility of mental health issues stemming from increased competitiveness, changes, lack of control over one’s life and work (top-down approach, as opposed to a bottom-up one), and technology, as outlined above.

- Social and societal exclusion
  - As a result of the above – increased work, the increased role of technology in one’s life, and the stress that can be induced by it, the individual might feel excluded from society or might not realize that they are getting disconnected from society. They might stop interacting with their friends and family, spend increasing amounts of time by themselves, and might develop a loss of emotional concern for others, resulting in a possibility of mental health issues.

- Emotional labor
  - The displaying of emotions that are in line with organizational emotional standards, as opposed to being honest and open about how an individual is feeling. This too is a
cause for stress and can also result in an exclusion from society, and especially from oneself.

- End/start interviews
  - Giving an interview for any job is a big occasion for an individual, and itself creates a stressful environment for the person who is sitting for one. If the interviewer(s) do not make it any easier by asking rapid questions or through constant reminders of how big the job is, there will be increased mental stress on the individual sitting for the interview.
  - If words of encouragement, or even help at times, are replaced by words of demotivation, scorn or even uselessness, the individual walks away feeling like their world is literally going to collapse around them.
  - Instead, the interviewer should look to motivate the concerned individual, and look to offer advice, no matter the end result of the interview. Tips on how the individual could have performed better should also be given.
  - As opposed to making it a matter of life and death, interviewers should assess the situation as one from which the individual can learn the most from.

Having outlined a broad variety of effects a workplace environment can have on an individual, I will now provide a brief overview of the ways language can impact the mental health of employees.

Employees, no matter the level of seniority, are all under pressure to deliver. They all also must rely on other individuals within the organization to get their work done. As such, there is by default, a pressure to communicate within an organization. Such communication however, must be short, to the point and crisp in order to save the most amount of time. As such, this creates a necessity to communicate with other people, but the quality of such conversations is usually something left to be desired for.

Thus, the manner, tone and words used are all vitally important. Instead of concentrating on negative words and sentences like, “your performance last quarter was so...” or “that’s not what the company would like to portray...” if a similar effort was shown towards positive sentences and phrases such as “you can do it!” or “the company needs you”, work itself might get a lot easier and more enjoyable. A focus on motivational speech and positive words might have better chances of bringing the best out of employees and thus furthering the objective of the company and the organization as a whole.

In positive organizational psychology, the big five traits are confidence/self-efficacy, hope, optimism, subjective well-being/happiness and emotional intelligence. Such research recommends the usage of language towards furthering any of these objectives in order to positively impact the mental health of employees via language. An example might be the usage of such words and phrases during interviews when the interviewer is conveying the verdict of the said interview to the interviewee. A focus on the emotional well-being of the applicant, no matter the result, would go a long way towards bettering the mental health of the applicant.
Another example could be when the workforce is diverse with individuals coming from multiple and differentiated backgrounds. No matter the method of communication used, whether it is through body or sign language, or even through fragmented use of a common language, the aim of delivering the said message must be to further the emotional and motivational well-being of the individual and to promote happiness and a culture of ease at the workplace.

Having talked about the effects a workplace can have on the mental health of individuals and the ways language can influence the same, having provided examples in each of the cases, I will now briefly elaborate on why furthering the mental health of its employees is beneficial to an organization.

Mental health issues impact an employee’s well-being in a myriad of ways as demonstrated above. As such, it can only be in the organization’s best interests to further the mental health of its employees. A brief list of possible advantages to the company is as follows: -

- Less missed days
- Higher overall productivity
- Lesser staff turnover
- Workers’ compensation getting paid off
- Medical insurance & other stress-related expenses decrease
- If stress becomes a huge issue and a business starts to experience issues, it can even make it hard to acquire new talent. With websites like Glassdoor.com, where former employees can anonymously review their former employer, word can quickly spread about an unhealthy work environment, and it can become a challenge to attract top talent. Ultimately, the result of all of this is lost revenue for a business.

- Better reputation
- Regarding interviews, the public reaction the company would receive if it was to prioritize an applicant’s mental health and well-being would be favorable and positive. This might itself result in more applicants applying to the concerned company.

Having elaborated on the possible mental health stresses in a workplace, and why a company should be invested in improving the mental health of its employees, recommendations on how to go about doing so would be given based on currently established programs.

One initiative that is making a difference in spreading the word about the importance of investing in mental health care is the Center for Workplace Mental Health in the United States, which is under the purview of the APA Foundation.

The mission of the center is to help workers with mental illness by inspiring companies to increase awareness of mental health issues and provide better support for employees. The Center for Workplace Mental Health, originally known as the Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, grew out of the idea that APA should be partnering with employers to work on issues related to mental
health. Two ways in which the center facilitates this is through the ICU (Identify, Connect, Understand) and Right Direction programs. ICU is an awareness campaign tailored for the workplace and designed to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. The idea is to foster a workplace culture where mental health can be discussed openly and where emotional health is valued. ICU, sometimes referred to as “I See You,” was initially developed by DuPont’s Employee Assistance Program. DuPont has since donated the program to the Center for Workplace Mental Health, which provides it cost-free to interested employers.

Right Direction was developed by the Center in partnership with Employers Health Coalition and is a first-of-its-kind program designed to give employers the tools they need to address depression in the workplace.

The above two programs group psychologically healthy workplaces into five broad categories:

- **Employee involvement**
  - Efforts to increase employee involvement empower workers, involve them in decision making and give them increased job autonomy. Employee involvement programs can increase job satisfaction, employee morale and commitment to the organization, as well as increase productivity, reduce turnover and absenteeism and enhance the quality of products and services.
  - Efforts to involve employees in meaningful ways include:
    - Self-managed work teams, employee committees or task forces, continuous improvement teams, participative decision making, employee suggestion forums, such as a suggestion box and monthly meetings

- **Work-life balance**
  - Programs and policies that facilitate work-life balance acknowledge that employees have responsibilities and lives outside of work and help individuals better manage these multiple demands. Conflict between work and other life responsibilities can diminish the quality of both work and home life for employees, which in turn can affect organizational outcomes such as productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. Efforts to help employees improve work-life balance can improve morale, increase job satisfaction and strengthen employees’ commitment to the organization. Additionally, the organization may reap benefits in terms of increased productivity and reduction in absenteeism and employee turnover.
  - Programs and policies that can promote work-life balance include:
    - Flexible work arrangements, such as flextime and telecommuting, assistance with childcare, eldercare benefits, resources to help employees manage personal financial issues, availability of benefits for family members and domestic partners and flexible leave options

- **Employee growth & development**
Opportunities for growth and development help employees expand their knowledge, skills and abilities, and apply the competencies they have gained to new situations. The opportunity to gain new skills and experiences can increase employee motivation and job satisfaction and help workers more effectively manage job stress. This can translate into positive gains for the organization by enhancing organizational effectiveness and improving work quality, as well as by helping the organization attract and retain top-quality employees. By providing opportunities for growth and development, organizations can improve the quality of their employees' work experience and realize the benefits of developing workers to their full potential.

Opportunities for employee growth and development include:

- Continuing education courses, tuition reimbursement, career development or counseling services, skills training provided in-house or through outside training centers, opportunities for promotion and internal career advancement, coaching, mentoring, and leadership development programs, and family day events to foster closeness between one’s family and home environment and the workplace

- Health & safety

Health and safety initiatives maximize the physical and mental health of employees through the prevention, assessment, and treatment of potential health risks and problems and by encouraging and supporting healthy lifestyle and behavior choices. Health and safety efforts include a wide variety of workplace practices that can help employees improve their physical and mental health, reduce health risks, and manage stress effectively. By investing in the health and safety of their employees, organizations may benefit from greater productivity and reductions in healthcare costs, absenteeism and accident/injury rates.

Efforts to address health and safety issues in the workplace include:

Training and safeguards that address workplace safety and security issues, efforts to help employees develop a healthy lifestyle, such as stress management, weight loss and smoking cessation programs, adequate health insurance, including mental health coverage, health screenings, access to health/fitness/recreation facilities, resources to help employees address life problems, for example, grief counseling, alcohol abuse programs, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and referrals for mental health services

- Employee recognition

Employee recognition efforts reward employees both individually and collectively for their contributions to the organization. Recognition can take various forms, formal and informal, monetary and non-monetary. By acknowledging employee efforts and making them feel valued and appreciated, organizations can increase employee satisfaction, morale, and self-esteem. Additionally, the organization itself may benefit from greater employee engagement and productivity, lower turnover and the ability to attract and retain top quality employees.
Ways of recognizing employee contributions include:

Fair monetary compensation, competitive benefits packages, acknowledgement of contributions and milestones, performance-based bonuses and pay increases, employee awards, recognition ceremonies.

Another initiative is SANE Australia’s (SANE Australia is a national charity helping all Australians affected by mental illness) Mindful Employer program. It is a training solution that provides managers with the skills and confidence to respond effectively to signs of mental health problems at work and manage reasonable workplace adjustments. Mindful Employer helps managers create a more positive and supportive workplace, and avoid the costs of not responding appropriately to mental health problems. Mindful Employer offers online and face-to-face solutions. It focuses on mental health awareness training and teaching the skills to work with, and support, an employee who has, or is caring for someone with, a mental illness. It provides answers to important questions such as:

- What are the signs of a mental health problem?
- What does one do if they are concerned for a colleague or employee?
- How does one manage reasonable workplace adjustments?

An initiative that is successful and popular in India is Optum, an EAP (employee assistance program) provider. Optum’s EAPs offer counselling sessions by phone, Internet or face-to-face communication, enabling employees to speak to a professional counsellor through their preferred medium.

Optum employee assistance programs include:

- A member portal - Each employee has 24/7 access to an online portal providing comprehensive information on mental and physical health and well-being, online services and screeners to help them stay healthy.
- A dedicated account management team - A dedicated account management team helps clients manage and maximize their employee assistance program.
- Confidentiality - To ensure that colleagues don’t run into each other, they book their appointments for times that don’t overlap.

Corporate stress levels in India

With demanding schedules, high stress levels and performance linked prerequisites in private sectors; nearly 42.5% of employees in private sectors are afflicted from depression or an anxiety disorder, compared to government employees with lesser levels of psychological demand at work, an ASSOCHAM (Associated Chambers of Commerce of India) study conducted in 2015 coinciding with the “World Health day” noted. The rate of emotional problems such as anxiety and depression has increased by 45-50% among corporate employees in the last eight years, according to the ASSOCHAM recent study.
The report is based on the views of 1,250 corporate employees from 150 companies across 18 broad sectors like media, telecom and knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) etc. The report included the major cities like Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Pune, Chandigarh, Dehradun etc. A little over 200 employees were selected from each city on an average.

Mental Health Not-for-Profit Initiative in India

The Association of People with Disability (APD) is a non-profit organization based out of Bangalore. Founded in 1959, they have worked extensively over the last 58 years to reach out and rehabilitate people with disability from the under privileged segment. APD’s Community Mental Health Program has been operational since 2004. In the last 10 years, they have reached out to almost 2000 people with mental illness through targeted activities like identification, providing access to mental health care and social & economic rehabilitation. Having started with 19 slums in Bangalore, the program now covers specific taluks of Kolar, Davangere, Chikkaballapur and Bijapur, all of which are districts in Karnataka.

Road Map

- Identification: A survey conducted over a 4-5 month period will assess and identify people with mental illness who will form the baseline workgroup for the project. APD expects to identify at least 1000 people from this survey who will benefit from the mental health program.

- Access to mental health care: The identified people will be directed to health care authorities to access treatment. This is a process that involves creating a social acceptance of their condition and a willingness to approach health care specialists, breaking barriers of stigma and traditional healing practices. APD’s team will follow up and keep records on each case, ensuring that people with mental illness can access regular care and receive necessary medication.

- Capacity building: A key component of the community program is building a capacity among communities and government agencies. APD will create social awareness through street plays, exhibitions, wall writing, posters and handbills. Further, caregivers and parents will be encouraged to form groups and APD will facilitate monthly meetings, providing them a forum for discussion on common issues. Two 3-day residential camps for people with mental illnesses and their caregivers will be organized to help reinforce inputs on mental illness, rehabilitation and advocacy.

- Rehabilitation: The process of social integration and rehabilitation involves creating acceptance among family and community groups through regular orientation and counselling. APD will attempt to ensure livelihood opportunities for people with mental illnesses whose condition stabilizes after treatment. People with mental illnesses from rural communities will be provided assistance in procuring MNREGA cards that will enable them to seek employment. They estimate that up to 300-350 people with mental illnesses can be rehabilitated through sustained effort over a period of time, while others requiring
continued mental health care will be able to access treatment and counselling services without any difficulty.

Conclusion

Mental health problems in workplaces are prevalent and need to be addressed. The various sources of mental health stress have been noted. How language impacts the same and various recommendations to go about improving the mental health of employees have also been provided keeping in mind five positive psychological traits. Various real-life examples and initiatives have also been provided on how employers can implement programs and measures to improve the mental health of employees. Workplaces, of all kinds, need to acknowledge the importance of mental health and go about improving the same.
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Meet the Author

Yash Budhwar is a 21-year-old graduate from Ashoka University. Having completed a BA in Economics, with a minor in Psychology, he has always been interested in research. To that end, he is currently doing research for The Bastion, an online news portal that was started by a few of his college friends. He has also prepared research papers for his college studies as well as for not-for-profits such as The WordsWorth Project and The Red Elephant Foundation, focusing on children’s education and mental health respectively. Having developed a keen interest in finance during college via online courses and fitness, Yash is currently employed by Citibank in their Corporate Finance Department and is in the process of developing his own website, aiming to offer customised nutrition and workout programs for interested members. Yash can be reached for feedback via email at yashbudhwar@yahoo.com