



KEY INSIGHTS:  
Making mental  
health a global  
priority for business

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THE GLOBAL BUSINESS COLLABORATION  
for Better Workplace Mental Health

MindForward  
Alliance

On World Mental Health Day, The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health (GBC) hosted an event on making mental health a global priority for business. The audience included business leaders and practitioners from across the globe – including regions where mental health literacy is in its infancy – along with organisations that have signed the GBC leadership pledge.



Chaired by Dr Rob McDonald, Vice President Health and Hygiene BHP, event contributors included:



Karen Pleva,  
CEO Global Strategic Accounts, Sodexo



Elizabeth Bradford,  
COO Hong Kong, HSBC



Josh Krichefski, Global COO,  
EssenceMediaCom



Sunita Wazir,  
Global Wellbeing Lead, Unilever

Dr Rob McDonald, VP of Health and Hygiene for BHP, set the scene by introducing the GBC and communicating our vision for a world where workplace mental health is a priority for all businesses, in all sectors, across all geographies. But for global progress to be made, Rob reminded attendees of the need for leaders to take decisive, collective action. This is a global issue – highlighted by research from the McKinsey Health Institute, which found that one in four employees experience high burnout rates in every corner of the globe.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING STORIES



**In order for us to break down stigma, it's so important for us to be sharing stories, particularly stories of hope and recovery, and most particularly from our senior leaders.” - Rob McDonald**

HSBC Hong Kong COO Elizabeth Bradford helped to bring this vision to life by sharing her own experience of anxiety and burnout. After a close family member survived a suicide attempt in her childhood, Elizabeth became committed to ending the stigma that still prevents so many people from seeking support.



**I talk about these things a lot as a leader, because it's really important for people to understand that recognising symptoms early, and reaching out for help from your organisation or those around you, is a really critical way to thrive in your personal life, as well as your career.” - Elizabeth Bradford**

Elizabeth spoke about how this sense of stigma strongly persists in Asia, and that people often think they shouldn't talk about mental health if they're not at a senior level as it may give the impression that they're not robust – when actually, it's the opposite. Speaking about mental health takes an enormous amount of courage, and it's down to leaders to create an environment where people feel comfortable to do so.

After suffering from burnout in her first job and receiving no support, Elizabeth left the firm – evidencing the impact of failing to care for employee mental health.

When she joined HSBC, Elizabeth was given support in the form of a coach who helped with personal resilience. Being able to talk about mental health, normalise it, and know that she wasn't alone made all the difference. And after being given a platform to roll out wellbeing initiatives across the bank, a community of people all sharing their experiences was formed.

Elizabeth explained that signing the GBC Leadership pledge was critical for today's businesses, as it demonstrates a real commitment to helping employees to thrive.

## ADDRESSING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS DIFFERENT TERRITORIES

Karen Pleva, CEO of Sodexo's strategic accounts business, spoke about the challenges of striving for better workplace mental health when you operate in multiple jurisdictions, with different cultural issues and varying levels of stigma. As one of the world's largest employers, Sodexo exemplifies what can be achieved through leadership commitment.

Priding herself on being an empathetic leader and a role model for mental health, Karen operates an open door policy, makes sure to always take her holidays, and never fails to show a genuine interest in the lives of her people beyond work: "You can't always be a friend to everybody, but you can be a warm leader who's listening, who's watching and who's always on the lookout for the signals to be able to stop this silent epidemic in its tracks." - Karen Pleva

Mental health is critically important at Sodexo: people can't do a good job if their wellbeing isn't intact, so the mental health agenda has become a business imperative – more important than even physical safety. Sodexo is proud to have signed the leadership pledge to demonstrate their commitment, and to be held accountable

to their people. But they recognise the necessity of tailoring their approach across the globe.

As a global organisation, the ability to talk openly about mental health varies wildly from market to market. In some cultures, it's taboo. In deploying the pledge, it's important to be sensitive and have the right conversations. Depending on which market you're in, it can be hard for leaders to address wellbeing. Sensitivity towards cultural diversity is critical because without it, you could do more harm than good.

Karen explains that some of their actions to deliver the GBC pledge are quite simple: talking about mental health at the start of meetings, reducing the length of meetings to make sure people are taking appropriate breaks, and respecting people's home lives in different time zones. As an implicit contract between leaders and their teams, this is incredibly empowering; it also creates a shared responsibility for building an environment where wellbeing is the core focus.



**We have some terrific activities and opportunities for people all around the world, which we talk about openly at the start of every meeting. What's available in the UK might be quite different in China, and different again in Latin America. But there's nothing more important than removing the stigma." - Karen Pleva**



## PANEL DISCUSSION: KEY INSIGHTS

Josh Krichefski, COO of EssenceMediaCom, along with Unilever's Global Wellbeing Lead Sunita Wazir, joined Elizabeth Bradford for an insightful discussion into their different experiences of implementing global workplace mental health initiatives.

Josh talked passionately about the importance of prioritising mental health to build a good culture that supports people within competitive industries: "I wanted to retain high performance, but I wanted it to be a culture where people could bring their true selves to work and be comfortable speaking very openly and honestly."

He explained that EssenceMediaComm's approach to globalising its mental health programme was initially organic, with services available to everyone, but that the real success comes when these programs are owned by the people, for the people, in local markets. There's a framework in place, but EssenceMediaCom like their local markets to take ownership of what works for them. When Josh went to Poland, he was told that their teams wouldn't be interested in the topic of mental health, but on talking with the leadership team, they were hugely engaged and fascinated by it – because it's not often spoken about. This highlights the importance of raising conversations in these types of territories.

Elizabeth agreed with the importance of adapting global frameworks for local markets and cultural nuances. She shared insight into the stigma surrounding mental health in Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and other Asian markets, along with the importance of normalising conversations in that context. In fact, a survey conducted in Hong Kong last year showed that 71% of young adults would disassociate with someone if they knew they had mental health problems.

It's absolutely critical that leaders – no matter their level – share their own experiences and struggles to normalise these conversations in areas where stigma persists. Rather than hinder careers, this level of openness can actually help people to excel, as they're creating far healthier environments to work in.

For World Mental Health Day, HSBC celebrated leaders who both talk about and prioritise their mental health, and cascaded it across all of their markets. Operating in over 50 countries around the world, they recorded leaders talking openly about their experiences and the challenges they've faced – effectively creating one big mental health conversation to eradicate stigma across the business.

At Unilever there's similar global pressure, with geographic and demographic diversity. Sunita explained their three-pillar framework for addressing mental health across the 190 countries they operate in:

## 1 LEADERSHIP

Leaders are given extensive training in recognising and understanding how to support people with their mental health.

## 2 CULTURE

To ensure people are comfortable having these conversations, role modelling is a core focus. Leaders are encouraged to open up about their own vulnerabilities, while people from across the business are given the chance to share their lived experience.

## 3 COMMUNITY

Alongside formal prevention and support, Unilever has a community of internal mindfulness champions; there's also initiatives like the team energy program that helps leaders to understand where their team's energy is at. Rather than guesswork, this tool has been formalised with behaviour experts. There's also the highly effective global, completely confidential, 24/7 Employee Assistance Programme.

Alongside these pillars, Sunita talked of Unilever's Mental Health First Aiders that are operating around the world. Starting in the heart of the pandemic, people were offered mental health training to support their colleagues. Since that time, over 4,000 people have been trained. In India alone, almost 700 people have been trained in mental health on the shop floor. The programme was well received in markets with high levels of mental health literacy,

but it was important to train employees all around the world. After asking for global volunteers, cultural nuances had to be factored in when overcoming barriers.

To meet the demands of the post-pandemic digital age, Unilever developed an app – through which people can reach out to mental health champions. This also helps to support people in places where stigma still makes it difficult to outwardly seek support.



**There are markets where you can't talk about mental health; you can't talk about certain topics. But over the years, that's actually changed. The more we speak about it, the more people feel open to speaking out.” - Sunita Wazir**

## IMPLEMENTING THE GBC LEADERSHIP PLEDGE

Rob closed the session by reminding attendees of the intrinsic role that leaders have to play in making a public commitment to workplace mental health – and how signing the GBC leadership pledge can support this. Over 100 companies have signed the leadership pledge to date, which has the potential to impact over 1,600,000 employees. Current pledge signatories span over 17 industries, in 62 countries, across 6 continents.

When asked what advice the speakers would offer to leaders looking to champion mental health in the workplace, John stressed that it isn't a job you ever move on from: "So just keep on doing it and never expect it to end. Just keep on the journey." Sunita stressed the importance of vulnerability and openness from leadership, while Elizabeth talked about the need for visibility and clear communication in any organisation, along with an action plan – which is why signing the GBC leadership pledge is such a crucial step.

The future of healthy minds rests with today's business leaders, and following the steps laid out in the leadership pledge offer an actionable way to turn that vision into an achievable reality.



With thanks to the GBC Founding Partners:



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