Productivity starts with the mind.

8th February 2023

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The day-to-day stress of running a business can often mean that we neglect our own and our staff's mental wellbeing. We've come a long way from where mental health was taboo in the workplace, but there are still many who think that a wellbeing programme just involves putting some fruit out and suggesting people get a bit of exercise.

Wellbeing and mental health were the subjects of a recent Jersey Business Productivity Circle and Matt Falla, Managing Partner at Evelyn Partners, told the audience that ignoring it not only has a human cost, but will ultimately hit your bottom line.

Matt is both honest and earnest when he talks about mental health. There's no

clinical or professional window dressing, his is a raw human story born from personal experience. A successful career in banking hid an overbearing stress load that led to him eventually having more than one breakdown.

'I now have the skills to deal with that pressure and stress'

'My mental breakdown happened mid-way through my career, and for me at the time I thought it signalled the end of that career, but it's been the best worst thing that ever happened. Invariably now I'm a lot busier than I ever was when I suffered a breakdown, but I now have the skills to deal with that pressure and stress and hopefully impart that on the people who work with me.'

For anyone who hasn't experienced extreme mental strain, Matt describes it as like trying to walk with an injury.

'For me, my brain started to take over and realise that if I wasn't going to stop, then it was going to stop me for me. So, I became less and less efficient. I had to work longer and longer hours to get the same amount done to the point where my brain said "no", and you can't even choose what you want to wear in the morning and make a cup of tea. It is incredibly toxic and not only mentally but physiologically as well.'

If your staff and managers are not able to work productively, then it's going to hit your bottom line.

The cost is not only a human one. If your staff and managers are not able to work productively, then it's going to hit your bottom line. Matt empathises with business owners who are perhaps already trying to cope with low staff and tight budgets but says that to try to ignore mental health is a false economy.

'If someone is carrying that burden and are continually denying how they feel day after day eventually something will happen. They'll make a mistake at work, their productivity will drop, or they will leave. And quite often leaving is the easiest option because starting afresh is far easier than trying to change.'

Being busy has become something of a status symbol in our society, but the key to success is to be productive with your time, and to also allow yourself some 'down time'. But, how do you know when you or your staff are getting to the limit?

‘It’s incredibly personal to that person. If you look at me, I’ve now got to the place where I know what good feels like, so I now know all the signs of bad. So, if I’m biting my nails, if I’m not sleeping as well, if I don’t feel as hungry as I normally would, I don’t feel much willingness to do exercise, or if my brain is just a bit scrambled; I know it’s the signs that I’m probably doing too much, or something is nagging that I just need to take some time out from.’

Many people have reported increased levels of anxiety following the pandemic, and in relation to both the economic situation and the war in Ukraine, but Matt thinks mental stress is always there.

‘I work in investment management, and I had a client saying, “I’m just waiting for things to be normal before I invest.” The reality is life is never normal. It’s as stressful in the moment of this as it was in the moment of covid as it was in the moment of the financial crisis. So, it’s an acceptance that the world is volatile, that it cannot be controlled, that it is random and things such as flooding in Grand Vaux and the terrible events that happened in Pier Road are apt to happen; and it’s that acceptance I think which is the biggest thing.

'A fruit basket is pointless if people are working twelve hour days'

‘I rail very much against wellbeing starting and stopping with the fruit basket. Wellbeing is pointless and a fruit basket is pointless if people are working twelve-hour days. You have to care about how people are working first and foremost, and truly speaking to and caring about the response you get from your staff, that is the start.’

Going through the experience himself has made him a better leader, as well as led to a far greater understanding of his own health and productivity.

‘Business leaders need to be authentic. This can’t be a pop up on the calendar, let’s ask someone about their wellbeing and have a wellbeing week. It has to be embedded in our businesses. Gone are the days when you leave yourself at the door at 8.59am and pick yourself back up again at 5.01pm. We are a function of our lives. Work life balance is fluid. ‘As managers we can constantly feel that we need to be doing, leading, directing, but I think trust goes a huge way and knowing your employees and really caring about them and empathising with them goes a huge way towards them giving much more than you’d expect them to give.”

Support is available

There is plenty of support available. Charities like Mind Jersey offer advice, as well as training for businesses. Individuals can go to their GP, and Matt runs a club called the ManClub, which is a space for men to talk openly and confidentially.

'The thing I wish I had done more is ask for help and guidance and direction rather than just trying to flounder, because I think I cared more about my ego than my mental health. Reach out to anyone who you know and trust, that's a start. As more employers realise that someone's mental wellbeing and physical health is intrinsically connected to the success of the business, I hope that more come to embrace every part of it.'

The Jersey Business Productivity Circle, is a forum for people interested in business improvements, wanting to meet, learn new things, collaborate, and network and share ideas. Held bi-monthly, it's open to anyone, across industries. For more information on the circle visit our events page.

This article originally appeared in the JEP in February 2023