

**PANDEMIC RESPONSE** BY MARK GORDON | MANAGING EDITOR


LORI SAX

SHARON LESKO, the human resources director with Senior Friendship Centers, says good leaders need to actively listen to employees.

# Be Well

Keeping employees engaged — and mentally strong — at work is now a pandemic-era challenge like no other. Strategies, from providing clarity to espousing empathy to toilet roll basketball, are in the offing.

**L**ondon Bay Homes employees toiling away at their desks Friday afternoons can get downright giddy when they spot CEO and President Mark Wilson. That's because the soft-spoken, gentlemanly English-born Wilson, right around 5 p.m., is one of several top leaders at the company in charge of a big task: pushing a drink cart up and down the aisles.

The CEO-turned-bartender will pour a glass of wine for one employee, hand another one a beer. Wilson and other cart-pushing executives — wearing face masks — will stop and chat with employees. "It gives us a reason to say hello," Wilson says, "to say cheers."

Employees at companies across the region could lose a lot more cheer these days, as the pandemic nears the 10-month mark. From Zoom

fatigue to isolation from colleagues to election stress (and a surprise hurricane/tropical storm Nov. 11) employee stress is at an all-time high, according to multiple surveys.

Nearly eight in 10 adults, 78%, for example, say the pandemic is a "significant source of stress in their lives," according to the Stress in America 2020 report released in late October from the American Psychological Association. More than 50% of employees, in another survey, from Harvard Business Review, say they are experiencing some level of emotional exhaustion. And the Kaiser Family Foundation reports 45% of Americans believe the pandemic has affected their mental health — more than double the pre-pandemic rate.

For executives of companies with a workforce that skews younger, the issue is even more acute: Gen Z, by a wide margin

over any other generation, are the most likely to report experiencing common symptoms of depression, the Stress in America 2020 report found.

Yet despite what seems like an abyss of anxiety, business leaders can combat this crisis at the workplace. Examples dot the region, from tangible, like the London Bay Homes drink cart, to the intangible, such as regular phone call check-ins from top leaders. Some of the actions executives have taken follow servant leadership ethos, in that empowering employees goes a long way to eliminate, or at least curtail, anxiety.

"I think the three most important things are empathy, flexibility and understanding," Wilson says, putting on his workplace psychologist hat while he runs London Bay, which builds luxury custom estates and multifamily homes, priced up to \$15 million, from Naples to Lakewood Ranch. "In the last [nine] months, nothing has been more important than letting your teammates know you are here for them and you care."

## GOOD LISTENER

That's the approach human resources officials and leadership coaches recommend executives take.

"You need to listen," says Sharon Lesko, the human resources director with Senior Friendship Centers, a Sarasota-based nonprofit that provides a wide range of resources for se-

niors in four Southwest Florida counties. Lesko's career stops include Starbucks, where, among other tasks, she helped hire and train store employees at the coffee giant, widely known for its empathic corporate culture. "As a leader, you have to recognize it's OK [for employees] not to be OK."

Denise Federer, the founder and principal of Tampa-based Federer Performance Management Group, agrees that listening is key. She adds that employees, in times of crisis like the pandemic — but good counsel for any time as well — need predictability, accountability and consistency from top leaders. "You have to be very clear with what you want," says Federer, a behavioral psychologist, "and what your expectations are."

Michael Corley, a former president and COO of a Sarasota-Bradenton area Professional Employer Services firm who now coaches and advises other leaders, says along with setting expectations comes clarity. That's a valuable perk for employees in stressful times.

"It is uncertainty that causes stress, anxiety and frustration," Corley says. "If a business leader wants to reduce stress for employees, he/she must provide clarity. Specifically, clarity of direction for the company, clarity of direction related to the employees' positions and contributions, clarity of job security and clarity as to procedures related to COVID-19,"



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**Ben Jones** | Allegiant Private Advisors

including remote versus office, employees with kids learning from home and other issues.

**GOOD CHEER**

Although clarity, empathy and a good listening ear is crucial to helping employees, things you can touch and feel — or, like at London Bay Homes, drink — helps too. Add good humor to that list.

Federer, for example, says a client of hers at a large financial corporation based in a major metro area up north, a high-powered CEO, tweaked the company Zoom meeting. Now he has regular check-ins at 7 a.m. with his team and other staffers, at what he’s dubbed a pajama party. It’s a come-as-you-are (wearing something, but not office-work attire) relaxed vibe.

The executive took some flak from other company leaders, Federer says, about being too silly and not ordering people back to the office. But the CEO’s jammies jam is a big win in it accomplishes a key part of managing employee stress: go where they are. “He took control of the situation,” she says, “and he normalized it.”

At Sarasota-based Al Purmort Insurance, normal, with a side of humor, now includes employee work-from-home Olympics. Events include paper airplane tosses and basketball, where employees shoot rolls of toilet paper into wastebaskets. They mark off the distance and send videos of the accomplishments to other participants. “We are trying to do little things,” says Patrick Del Medico, a partner and COO of the firm, with \$54 million in revenue in 2019 and 55 employees in Southwest Florida. “The employees love it.”

It’s not all fun and games at Al Purmort. Del Medico also calls

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**Denise Federer** | Federer Performance Management Group

two to three employees a day where he makes a point to not merely ask “How are you?” but “What do you need from me?”

Federer recommends all her C-suite clients do something like that. “A little compassion goes a long way,” she says. “Just reach out and ask people how they are doing and if there’s anything they need from you. It doesn’t take much — but it can mean a lot.”

**‘HARD AND SCARY’**

Other examples of helping employees navigate stress is more directed toward helping them help themselves, or at least setting them for that. “Wellness is a word really thrown around a lot these days, but it is really important employees take time to work on themselves,” says Lesko, with Friendship Centers. “No one really knows how long this will last, and people are really starting to get burned out right about now.”

Like many organizations, Senior Friendship Centers, with about 80 employees, fervently encourages employees to use all their vacation days and PTO. It recently upgraded its Employee Assistance Program, and Lesko also put together a series of virtual workshops on looking after yourself, which the organization opened up to several other nonprofits. Done in conjunction with another area nonprofit, the Resilient Retreat, recent classes include Compassion Fatigue, Self Care and How to Thrive, Not Just Survive in the New Normal. “You have to remember employees are human beings, not

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**Mark Wilson** | London Bay Homes

robots,” Lesko says, “and [the pandemic] can be really hard and scary.”

Sarasota-based Allegiant Private Advisors President Ben Jones likewise buys into the idea of helping employees help themselves. In April, Jones instituted a mini-sabbatical program at the wealth management and investment firm, where every employee, including senior-level leaders, gets one day off every three weeks. “We had to figure out a way for people to be forced to take a break, get a little breather,” Jones said at the time. “My only request was that they do something to help themselves.”

The program has been a big success. Although the 15-employee firm recently put the sabbatical program on a temporary sabbatical, when it got what Jones called “insanely busy” on several fronts, it’s expected to return in early 2021. Why? It allowed employees both time to recharge and, even with just one day, Jones says, come back to work with a renewed sense of purpose — despite the circling stress around them.

“We need to be building a path for employees to take ownership of their passion projects and foster a high level of engagement,” Jones says. “Happy employees are great, but engaged employees are magical. To me there is no better way to fight COVID-19 fatigue than to inspire a higher level of engagement.”

**BEAUTIFUL MIND**



AllTrust Insurance CEO **TIM LOVE** says practicing mindfulness is crucial in the pandemic.

Given his role overseeing AllTrust Insurance, a firm that does employee benefits and HR consulting, Tim Love is well positioned to see the mental health crisis the pandemic has brought to a variety of workplaces.

Love and AllTrust have taken a proactive approach to the issue, partnering with eMindful, one of the leading providers of live, virtual mindfulness programs. Palm Harbor-based Alltrust will include eMindful’s eM Life solution in its offerings for its entire book of business, covering some 300 clients, many on the west coast of Florida. “One of our mantras is to bring Fortune 500 benefits to Main Street America,” Love says.

Alltrust clients, employees and their dependents now have unlimited access to eMindful’s programs, according to a statement, which promote health, happiness and performance. Offerings include live, expert-led, online mindfulness sessions and hundreds of hours of on-demand content, ranging from three to 30 minute sessions. “It’s kind of like Peloton for the mind,” Love says. “It allows people to slow down so they can speed up.”

Making this free for clients, Love says, is a six-figure investment for the AllTrust, which did \$13 million in revenue in 2019. The response, so far, has been positive in a limited time frame, with a challenge being educating clients’ employees the program exists — and is free. “We find, like anything else, the more they use it the more they like it,” Love says.

— Mark Gordon

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Industry.** Mental health, human resources **Trend.** Employees at all levels are suffering from a common ailment: pandemic fatigue **Key.** Practicing empathy is crucial