

# RECOGNISING THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL WELL-BEING AT WORK

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Mr Kuah Boon Wee is the Group Chief Executive Officer of MTQ Corporation. He is also a Council Member of the Singapore National Employers Federation. A winner of the Best CEO Award in 2015, he believes in the importance of creating a congenial work environment. Mr Kuah shares how employers can support their employees in managing their mental health, a topic that may not often be discussed openly in the workplace.

## Could you share about your experiences with mental health and how that has affected you at work and outside of work?

I have had experience dealing with depression, having seen a family member and a senior colleagues at work go through these episodes. I saw how their deteriorating mental health disrupted their lives, rendering them unable to perform daily activities effectively. My colleague suffered meltdowns, and was unable to cope with work activities. Eventually, he stopped working altogether. It was an extremely sobering experience for me in having to deal with that.

## What advice would you give someone, like yourself a business owner, facing mental health challenges at work? What did you do to cope and what kind of support did you tap on?

We need to recognise that mental health issues are real and complex issues that may not be easily 'fixed'. Employers tend to view mental health issues as common physical ailments, and that it will be resolved after seeking medical treatment and taking proper medication. Sadly, that's not always the case. The key is to provide support, be understanding and always lend a listening ear.

It is important that we acknowledge the need to reach out to someone and seek help when we face mental health challenges at work. We must shed the stigma and not view mental health as a form of individual weakness.

As an employer myself, I am mindful of my own mental health, especially during this challenging period. When employers demonstrate self-care and healthy boundaries, we set the tone for our employees.

## What do you think employers can do to help support employees? In taking care of those at risk, is there anything they should be paying more attention to?

As employers, we should acknowledge our role in cultivating a workplace environment that is safe and supportive. When we do so, we are encouraging our employees to be less afraid to share their issues openly, without feeling stigmatised or mislabelled as being weak. It is also important that employers provide long-term mental health support for our employees, through means such as showing empathy and demonstrating compassion to employees struggling to cope by encouraging them to take time-off to seek treatment. As employers, we should not allow negative emotions to cloud our judgement, and inadvertently, make impulsive decisions or judgements in the heat of the moment. When there are issues occurring in the workplace, employers should assess the environment, and address them by identifying areas for improvement.

## Looking back at 2021, what were the top three things that you or your team did at the workplace for mental well-being that you are most proud of? What benefits has the company reaped upon introducing such initiatives?

Having the flexibility to work remotely at home has been beneficial to our employees as it helps them meet both their work and personal demands. Rather than dictating a fixed schedule for our employees, we try to accommodate what works best for them. We also understand that our employees have their own personal commitments, so we try not to impose on them by avoiding long work calls, or meetings during mealtimes or outside of working hours. During the Circuit Breaker, we even arranged for food to be delivered to our employees at home. I also find one-to-one conversations with employees to be more effective and engaging. Employees feel more connected and are more open to share their views.

Having implemented these workplace mental well-being initiatives, we have seen greater productivity and improved employee retention.

## Looking ahead for 2022, what is your wish for the mental well-being of Singapore's workforce?

I hope that the overall mental well-being of Singapore's workforce improves in the future. More people should recognise that we all face personal struggles, and that our mental well-being can impact our performance at the workplace. We should be appreciative of others and acknowledge the challenges that they face. This is why having a good and healthy work environment is important.

## Lastly, in short, what does mental well-being mean to you?

The mental well-being of our employees is important to the future of our company. While motivating our employees using only traditional financial means may seem effective at first, its returns are likely to diminish in the long run.

Find out how your company can manage your employees' health and safety in an integrated way, and educate them on how to better care for their well-being through our **Total Workplace Safety and Health Programme**.