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“CALLING EMPATHY A “SOFT SKILL”
IS WRONG. IT’S A LIFE SKILL
TO CHAMPION AND WHAT EVERY
SCHOOL LEAVER NEEDS”

REBEKAH WALLIS
DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE & CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY
RICOH UK





ARTICLE BY BECKY WESTWOOD DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMES & COACHING -
MONKEY PUZZLE TRAINING & CONSULTING

PRESENT TENSE

LEADERS HAVE HAD TO NAVIGATE THROUGH SOME EXTREMELY TOUGH TIMES AND EVEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, STRESS, BURNOUT AND WORK-RELATED MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WERE AT RECORD NUMBERS. BUT AS WE LOOK TO CONSTRUCT A NEW WAY OF WORKING, CREATING A CULTURE THAT IS SUPPORTIVE, EMPATHETIC AND REDUCES ANXIETY, IS AN IMPERATIVE.

We are still working through great uncertainty and adjusting, having experienced circumstances unprecedented in modern times. For leaders, managing through the unknown will have taken its toll, but leaders and managers need to lead by example, to make anxiety more handleable. Like never before, employees will be looking to leaders to help ameliorate their own anxiety levels, as we all tentatively transition into the new era or work. This will require clarity, direction and empathy. In volatile times, people sense anxiety and levels escalate when there is uncertainty and ambiguity and so communicating with authenticity and clarity is essential. There are times when we all doubt if we are up to the roles we are doing. It's natural to question if we have the ability to do what is being asked of us and being a leader is no exception. In fact, it is thought that up to 70 percent of people experience this at some point. It's damaging for organisations as people experiencing Imposter Syndrome will take fewer risks, make less progress in their work and become inefficient, because their self-doubt leads to intense procrastination or constant checking.

It is perhaps understandable that some leaders are not comfortable in opening up about their own struggles with anxiety and mental health. Research from BUPA found that 42 percent of board-level executives felt their reputation

would be harmed if it became known they were struggling. However, more transparency is exactly what many employees need. By normalising mental health issues like anxiety, it helps to build

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a more accepting culture which lowers levels of anxiety as it becomes recognised. If leaders can lead on anxiety through their own transparency, they will help to create a culture where others feel comfortable to speak out. The more people can share experiences and regain confidence, the less the anxiety.

The signs are there, but they are hard to spot, especially when you may think that what you are experiencing comes with the job. Ask yourself, have your work and energy levels deteriorated, are you experiencing changes in mood or the

inability to focus? Likewise, what can you do as a leader to manage anxiety in your teams? Have you noticed anything changing with the general mood and morale? In particular, are incidents of sickness absence going up? This might be a sign of mental health and anxiety issues and asking open questions gives people the opportunity to speak. With so much remote working, don't forget to check in with those you don't see so often - many of which may be carrying increased levels of anxiety - made worse by a feeling of detachment from what the business.

One of the hardest things to do is to recognise that you need to look after yourself. Others may have told you, but only you can acknowledge it. When you recognise the symptoms and give yourself a realistic break - because you certainly aren't the only one - it's time to build a programme that works for you. This might be making time for some physical exercise, or time where you can guarantee no interruptions so you can let ideas form. There are real mental health benefits in physical movement and the positive feelings it can generate. Remember, you can't manage your organisation and the many challenges ahead, unless you realise that you first need to manage your own anxiety.

FOR FURTHER INFO
[MONKEYPUZZLETRAINING.CO.UK](https://www.monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk)