A Manager's Guide to

Developing Cultural Competence in the Workplace

World Mental Health Day on October 10 is an opportunity for workplace leaders to address the barriers to accessing mental health care with culturally responsive attitudes that respect their employees' identities and backgrounds.

Mental health may feel like a delicate topic to broach with your teams, but modern workplaces are acknowledging that a manager's role is far more personal than just supporting projects. Managers support people too, and developing cultural competence is critical for championing the mental health and well-being of teammates from underrepresented groups, including those who identify as Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

This guide offers a starting point for managers to develop cultural competence in promoting mental health in the workplace by celebrating the diversity of perspective and experience that every employee brings to their team.

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Hi! I'm Dr. Holman.

I'm a counseling psychologist and Workforce Transformation Program Manager at Lyra, your mental health benefit. I'm passionate about empowering and educating individuals in BIPOC communities to utilize mental health services both at work and at home.

Understanding the context

People of all backgrounds face obstacles to accessing mental health support. A recent population health study of over 50,000 participants found that about 95 percent reported at least one hurdle to accessing mental health services.

Employees of diverse identities and faiths may experience further barriers to getting mental health care—especially clinical care that's culturally competent. Part of developing cultural competence as a manager is understanding these obstacles so you can lend support.

Common barriers to mental health care access include:

Lingering stigma
In some communities, mental health has become a common conversation topic, but in others, stigma still exists. Eight in 10 workers report that shame keeps them from seeking mental health treatment, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness' StigmaFree Company initiative.

Distrust toward mental health care
BIPOC individuals may have feelings of distrust toward the mental health system. An American Psychological Association workforce report noted that 86 percent of psychologists in the United States are white. This, when paired with historical and contemporary instances of systemic oppression, results in an understandable fear of being vulnerable to white people.

Systemic racism
Documented abuses, inequities, and oppression—past and present—have led some people of color to lose trust in health care providers, including mental health professionals. The Commonwealth Fund's 2021 scorecard on racial and ethnic equity in U.S. health care reported that people of color often receive lower quality mental health care than white people. As a result, BIPOC individuals often don't receive the mental health support they need.

Lack of culturally competent providers
Another barrier to receiving mental health care for underrepresented communities is a lack of cultural competence among mental health providers. These are skills that lead to effective and appropriate communication with people of other backgrounds. Cultural competence allows people to feel comfortable with their provider, which in turn encourages them to continue receiving care.

16 ways to build cultural competence in the workplace

Because managers often interact with their team daily, they're well-positioned to recognize when an employee may be struggling with mental health concerns and to help connect them to available resources.

You can support your direct reports' well-being and develop a culturally competent team by empathy, modeling, investing, and redesigning policy.

💙 Forge empathy

1. **Remember that you're managing people—not productive units.**
   When employees come to you in distress, listen and have empathetic conversations. Let them know that their well-being matters more than their work and that your top priority is ensuring they feel safe, valued, and respected.

2. **Foster a culture of connection among employees.**
   Implement support groups, employee resource groups, and informal opportunities for socializing as a team. When possible, consider treating employees to a group lunch or sponsoring an activity that celebrates the cultures represented on your team.

3. **Limit time in spaces that feel uncomfortable or potentially microaggressive.**
   While your direct reports may not be able to avoid these areas completely (e.g., a mandatory all-company call), you can help minimize their exposure and support their views. For instance, your employees may not feel comfortable submitting questions to a public Q&A with leadership; consider offering to submit questions on their behalf.

4. **Create room for employees to engage in spaces that feel safe and familiar.**
   Spending time with people and in communities where you feel known and that you belong can be restorative. Bear in mind that, even with your efforts at creating an inclusive environment, your employees may not feel that the workplace is restorative. Encourage taking PTO for resting and recharging, and protect their time off.

Model helpful behavior

5 **Encourage fellow managers to talk about their mental health.**
When you and other team leaders speak openly about mental health and well-being, other employees may feel more comfortable opening up about their own concerns as well.

6 **Be mindful of the language you and others use about mental health.**
Respond quickly to inappropriate remarks about mental health disorders, and model using clear language. Share resources such as the Conscious Style Guide with your team, and regularly circulate updates on inclusive terminology.

7 **Announce when you use your PTO.**
Or, consider telling your employees that you took time for a mid day walk or another form of self-care. Also, aim to limit your productive hours to your company's standard workday, which can help employees feel empowered to do the same.

8 **Prioritize a work culture that balances well-being and productivity.**
Some ways to create an environment that supports mental health include giving flexibility in how employees structure their days and where they get their work done. Accommodate time off requests to focus on improving emotional well-being, not just physical health.

Invest in your employees

9 **Evaluate cultural knowledge and fill in gaps.**
Many resources exist today for managers to measure employees' cultural competence. For instance, if you learn through a standardized survey that your team significantly struggles with implicit biases, teach strategies for recognizing bias, actively countering it, and making necessary repairs.

10 **Hire a culturally diverse workforce and support their growth.**
You're looking for people who can communicate effectively, understand cultural norms, and nurture relationships with team members in other parts of the world. Commit to these employees and help them reach leadership roles.

11 **Seek and promote education in culturally competent leadership.**
A survey of managers in the United States found that just 25 percent have received training on how to refer employees to mental health resources. How many fewer have learned how to offer culturally competent support? These skills should be prioritized in your managers' development roadmap.

12 **Support diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives.**
For example, can you launch a coaching program that spotlights cross-cultural experts? How about hosting a series of lunchtime sessions on mental health featuring therapists of diverse identities and faiths?

13 **Offer flexible options, such as working remotely.**
These options can be especially helpful if an employee discloses that <u>race-based stress</u> is interfering with their ability to be productive in certain spaces.

14 **Develop and enforce anti-discrimination policies.**
While creating guidelines is important, following through is just as critical. Leaders can build trust with employees by taking reports seriously and treating the reporter with respect and privacy.

15 **Adopt initiatives that support your employees' mental health needs.**
For instance, start a conversation with your team's leadership about how you can provide safe, confidential outlets for employees to express concerns and receive support. Regularly evaluate how these policies are (or are not) working.

16 **Advocate for better benefits for your employees.**
A baseline investment in a mental health plan isn't enough—especially given the scarcity of culturally responsive mental health providers. Challenge your leaders to prioritize the partners and packages that connect your employees to culturally competent care.

Further reading and resources from Lyra Health

Every employee's mental health needs are unique, and solutions should be tailored to the individual's specific context. The following articles can be helpful for ensuring that employees of various backgrounds flourish.

- <u>6 Ways to Support BIPOC Mental Health at Work</u>
- <u>8 Steps Employers Can Take to Support Latinx Employees in the Workplace</u>
- <u>Asian American Mental Health: Culture, Stigma, and Barriers</u>
- <u>Black Mental Health: Culture, Stigma, & Barriers</u>

Finding mental health solutions that acknowledge employees' lived experiences in the workplace is important. The resources below may be useful to share with those who are specifically experiencing racial stress.

- <u>4 Ways to Partake in Radical Self-Care for BIPOC Community Members</u>
- <u>8 Ways to Manage Racial Stress: A Toolkit for the AAPI Community</u>
- <u>Self-Care for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Amid Racial Trauma</u>
- <u>Taking Care While Experiencing Racial Stress: A Toolkit for the Black Community</u>

Get access to the right kind of care

Connecting with a mental health professional who understands and even shares your lived experience can be the difference between getting healthy and just getting by. At Lyra, we're endeavoring to connect employees with safe, respectful, and culturally responsive care—all to improve access to mental health care for workforces worldwide.

Lyra Health, your mental health benefit, is available for those who are interested in starting care. The Lyra network is made up of expert, compassionate providers of many backgrounds, lived experiences, and identities.

[Learn more about Lyra today](#).