



ETON BRIDGE PARTNERS MENTAL WELLBEING PANEL DEBATE 2022

Tackling Loneliness: How organisations can create belonging and inclusion

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Every year Eton Bridge Partners bring together an expert panel with a diverse range of experiences and perspectives to discuss mental wellbeing in the workplace, and its influence on organisational performance.

This year was the sixth in our series of our annual events and coincided with Mental Health Awareness Week driven by The Mental Health Foundation, whose key topic this year is tackling the epidemic of ‘loneliness.’ According to the Mental Health Foundation’s research, loneliness affects millions of people in the UK every year, is a key driver of poor mental health and has been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic.

It’s more important than ever for senior leaders and organisations to prioritise employee wellbeing. The continuous change which we’re all living through, ‘the Great Resignation’ and the war for talent have all raised the profile of employee wellbeing across any business. As such, the insights from this paper are relevant for everyone - not just HR professionals.

Taking place on Tuesday 10th May at the RSA in London, our fantastic panel explored how employers can help tackle loneliness, keep people connected, and foster a sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace.

Key discussion points:



How can organisations and their leaders continue to drive the agenda beyond diversity toward inclusion and belonging, enabling people to perform at their best and achieve their potential?



How can people, places, and technology interconnect to create optimal environments for both individual and collective/organisational performance?



How can leaders ensure their people remain connected to their colleagues in a meaningful way and feel included and attached to the organisation they work for?

Our panellists



Introduced and hosted by Eton Bridge Partner,
OLIVIA SHARP

“You don’t have to be alone to be lonely.”



CHAired BY
ELIZABETH MCGLONE
Partner at Didlaw

*“It’s about
recognising people
as individuals who
have their unique
challenges.”*



ANUSHIA REDDY
Global Talent Management
Strategy, Exec and
Leadership Capability,
Coaching and Wellbeing

*“Together all our
actions can make a
big difference.”*



BUKOLA BAYO-YUSUF
Strategic Human Resources
Business Partner, Global Finance &
Corporate Functions at Experian &
Co-founder of Excellerate Black
Futures

*The key thing is
making people think
about it and creating
psychological safety.”*



EMMA ROSE
Chief Human Resources
Officer at Travis Perkins

*“Connection is
really what drives
wellbeing.”*



JULIUS CORDELL
Previous Global HR
Director, Destination Asia
part of the Emirates Group,
former Senior Psychologist
in Police and Justice

*“We need to listen
and act, be front
and centre.”*



SIMON CLEMENTS
Talent Director at Drax Group and
Ambitious about Autism
Ambassador

*“Showing vulnerability
can help build
psychological safety.”*

Taking action to make connections in a remote world



“ We really need to help teams to have a listening culture and deepen bonds. **Anushia** ”

The pandemic has greatly reduced face to face contact, many of us continue to work from home or are remote or hybrid working. In this context, being unable to connect with people in person can be a problem. People leaders can bridge the gap by fostering an authentic, open and crucially connected work environment, whether people come into an office or not.

“One of the things we are focusing on is how we can ensure that everyone in our organisation feels seen in a situation when everyone feels quite hidden,” Emma said. “We coined a phrase which has really become part of our culture now, “You be you, it makes us, us.” And I think that has really helped people to be themselves and to tell their personal stories. The working from home aspect and the rise of remote meetings has given people a look into each other’s’ homes and their families, and I think we’ve all really appreciated a bit of insight into the person that we see in the office every day. It’s broken down a lot of barriers and helped us get a lot more comfortable with bringing ourselves to work.”

Anushia noted that leaders need to be aware of the impact that they have on people, and how they can influence the success of their teams and colleagues. A big part of that is leading with compassion. “Thinking about checking in, not checking up, on people, both personally and professionally. And not just talking about what’s happening at work but also what’s happening personally. This starts to connect people and help build a bond.”

Leaders should look for ways to encourage the team to consider how best to create connections, and make sure that they act on those suggestions. “Simple things like asking their teams “what would help us form connections and improve belonging in the organisation?” and acting on it, so everyone gets involved in workplace culture and building those bonds.”

It is important to note that leaders can also struggle with loneliness. “Leaders themselves can feel a lack of belonging and a lack of connection so there needs to be support in terms of making sure that we don’t stigmatise those conversations and create reciprocal conversations in all areas of the organisation.”

Julius agreed that action is key to reducing the stigma. “We need to listen and act, be front and centre,” he said. “Even prior to the pandemic, going back 20 years when I worked in the police force, we had a huge issue with officer suicide. There is a stigma that sits with mental health. One of the things we really encouraged was to be front and centre, and we had an initiative to say it’s ok for police officers to cry. That was a pivotal moment for the organisation where mental health became a key factor. It’s important for leadership to vocalise but also take action and make sure you do something about it and show people that they aren’t alone.”

Without the right training, many leaders won’t have the confidence to create deeper connections. Bukola pointed out the need to prioritise training. “Some people want to have those conversations but don’t feel equipped enough to have it. Mental health is particularly not discussed in the black community, so education to equip leaders to have those conversations is crucial.” And those conversations must go further than surface level. Bukola gave a useful approach for having authentic conversations.

“*It’s not just asking someone “are you ok?” It’s asking them again, “but are you really ok?” and meaning it.*

Bukola

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There has been increased emphasis in recent years on bringing your whole self to work. “Traditionally the workplace hasn’t been supportive of that,” Simon said. “If you look back over the past –few years, people might have had a work persona and felt like they had to be different in the workplace. And I think that’s fundamentally unhealthy.”

There are practical steps that organisations can take to encourage people to be more authentic in the workplace. Simon added; “One of the things we have done to really encourage people to bring themselves to work is creating a “User Manual of Me,” a very simple document where you talk about your communication preferences, your strengths, and anything you find challenging. You also share what’s going on in your life and things that might have an impact on how you’re feeling. You do that in a safe space, so you start building an understanding and create trust, and you use that as a foundation for having regular team wellbeing checks.”

The challenges of addressing loneliness at work

The pandemic has greatly reduced face to face contact, many of us continue to work from home or are remote or hybrid working. In this context, being unable to connect with people in person can be a problem. People leaders can bridge the gap by fostering an authentic, open and crucially connected work environment, whether people come into an office or not.

Finding ways of preventing loneliness: create systems that connect rather than isolate

Loneliness can be caused by feeling misunderstood or being forced to work in ways which are out of our comfort zone. Simon said that it's important that organisations look at their HR processes to find ways of best supporting their workers. "What adjustments or accommodations in recruitment, onboarding and the talent lifecycle can be made to help that individual be successful? What standardised systems and processes do we have that exclude people and make it challenging for people? We are all different and we all need different things."

"It is crucial to embrace people's individuality to enable them to be the best they can," Liz said.

Mental Health First Aiders have become a common feature in many businesses, and some companies are taking it to the next level.



Emma Rose shares a great example from Travis Perkins “We had a few branch managers who were passionate about mental health and how we can help mental health in our business. And we took two branch managers out of their roles, both of whom had experienced their own mental health challenges, and we made them Wellbeing Ambassadors. They spend their lives going out to our branches, talking about wellbeing, and listening to what’s going on in branches. And that has been so powerful because there is still a stigma related to colleagues talking to HR or talking to their managers about some of the issues that they have. Just being able to talk to someone who they can totally relate to, who has been in their position, done their job and experienced the issues that they are experiencing has been brilliant.” And those conversations have given leadership teams the information they need to better support their workers. “It’s given us a huge amount of insight into what actually makes a good initiative.” Emma said.

Companies also have a social responsibility to find ways of supporting the wider community. “The other thing we’re doing is taking that support element out to the community, with our Man Down initiative.” Emma said. “We are a male dominated industry, and mental health is even more stigmatised amongst men. We’re asking our colleagues to look out for each other and we’re also catching some of our customers who may need support, opening our internal support systems to support our customers too.”

Compassionately identifying loneliness

Not everyone has the emotional ability to spot loneliness in others, and some people hide it very well. Indeed, some people may be unable to identify loneliness in themselves. So how can organisations detect colleagues that might be struggling so that they can take action to support their people?

Julius said that while loneliness is different for everybody you will see changes in behaviours. “You might see symptoms of depression, anxiety, and a lack of enjoyment in normal daily life. Within work life you will see a decrease in performance, reluctance, absenteeism, presenteeism. All those general signs that we look at from a medical point of view, a lot of that feeds into what we can look at in colleagues.” And loneliness isn’t linear.

“*Loneliness is affected by breadth and depth of relationships. Depth of relationships is important, but it’s also the breadth, the number of relationships.*

Julius

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Reducing the stigma of talking about loneliness and mental health issues

Encouraging staff to be honest is one of the hardest parts of finding ways to support people.

“90% of people who experience loneliness don’t want to speak to, or share that with, their manager or HR department.” Anushia said. “Again, when leaders take the right actions, in creating a connected workplace, colleagues are more likely to notice when people might be struggling. It is important to help people to understand how big this problem is and realise that it’s everyone’s responsibility to address it.”

Anushia also pointed out that there is a misconception that loneliness is a weakness, and this means that people are less willing to speak up, and that is dangerous. “The effect that loneliness has on our body, it sounds quite dramatic, but it has the potential to kill. Connection is the antidote to loneliness.”

Bukola pointed out that the stigma of mental health is a particular problem in the black community. “Black people don’t like to talk about mental health and don’t like to go to therapy, where they feel that many - therapists haven’t faced the same challenges as them and won’t understand. But I think we’re starting to have those conversations now, and create that psychological safety, where people, especially black people, can feel that there is an understanding of the issues that they face. In black communities where there’s already a sense of discrimination or loneliness, creating that safety is crucial.” Bukola discussed how her organisation’s “This is Me” campaign, a longstanding initiative created by the Lord Mayor’s Appeal, which encourages people to bring their whole self to work, encouraged deeper conversations with colleagues. “It broke down boundaries and helped show that everyone is human. And I think that if the pandemic has done anything, it has merged all the boxes, we aren’t different people at work and at home anymore. Everything is blended.”



Key Takeaway: Connections are the antidote to loneliness

Liz ended the discussion with her three main takeaways:



Communication



Appreciating individualism – recognising people as humans



Championing differentials and diversity – drawing from people's individual strengths

Our panellists then gave their key learnings from the discussion, as ideas for leaders who want to change the culture in terms of loneliness and mental health within their organisation.

Create psychological safety

Bukola: “I love what Simon said about creating a manual for yourself, because it makes people think about it. Sometimes you don't really consider your trigger buttons, or what your preferences are, and doing that exercise would help. And if everyone does the exercise, it creates psychological safety as a team where people can be honest about their preferences. And I think that just keeps everyone in a knowing space to move forward.”

Encourage vulnerability to create a sense of connection

“ I think what we're saying is psychological safety is a good foundation for connection and showing vulnerability enables psychological safety. But vulnerability in any walk of life, let alone a workplace, and especially more traditional workplaces, is challenging. So, my key takeaway is to encourage vulnerability to create psychological safety and enable connection.

Simon



Remember that everyone is human with a vital need to connect

Anushia: “Focus on our shared humanity and seeing people beyond being employees, but as human beings. Help people to appreciate that the vital need to connect is as essential to our wellbeing and performance as having water and food. And my takeaway is to focus on how essential connection is, and that then builds empathy in organisations, and more compassionate and connected ways of working. This starts to dispel the notion of our separation and builds interdependence on each other, and on the environments we work and live in.”

Demand consistency across the organisation

There must be many ways to connect with people because everybody is different, and everyone will respond to something differently. But we must be consistent in how we show that willingness and compassion to hear people and allow them to be themselves. Often, companies let themselves down because we say one thing, and then somewhere else in the organisation colleagues say something different. That can undermine what we’re trying to do in that other space.

“

Consistency is the most important thing to get that authentic connection with your colleagues.

Emma

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Continue the discussion, the connection, and the education

Julius: As human beings, we’re creatures of togetherness. We want to be with people, but the pandemic has stripped a lot of that away. Discussions like these bring people together and help show the value of education and connection with leaders.

Conclusion

The discussion amongst panellists and audience members showed that there are still big differences between different organisations in their approach to mental wellbeing, the return to work and loneliness. Undoubtedly, in some businesses and cultures vulnerability is still considered a weakness, and the panelists offered some advice on tackling this sizeable challenge: bringing in statistics to improve organisational understanding of the commercial impact of loneliness can help - loneliness costs workplaces £2.23bn a year. These kinds of facts can help people who don't have an emotional perspective see how relevant it is. Anushia pointed out that loneliness is becoming a predictor of early death just like smoking or lack of exercise.

Emma also reminded us that fundamentally, people work for people, they don't work for organisations. And what makes a good leader in today's workplace has fundamentally changed, and even the most traditional leaders now recognise that to get the best out of people you may need to change the way you lead.'

Similarly, the panel agreed that a one size fits all approach to getting people back into the office is unlikely to work, not least because people have felt more control in many cases over where they work, and how. Creating worthwhile 'in office' experiences that enable better, more productive and rewarding connections in the workplace is important. Previously the emphasis was on creating open plan offices but in many cases they can alienate workers just as much as enclosed office spaces. We must be mindful of creating alternative ways of working, creating unity, so people feel that they belong to the organisation they work for and the people they work with.

The discussion was wide ranging but what came through is that we are all innately different and have different needs, as well as different superpowers. And this discussion has reinforced the need to be authentic and bring your whole self to work. We must consider how we enable that in our workforces and the people we work alongside. We can and must do things to change the reality of loneliness, whether the loneliness is transient or permanent.



“ *We all have an innate need to belong. Being lonely is not an illness, but it is becoming an epidemic.* ”
Olivia



Thank you to everyone who attended the event. We look forward to welcoming you back next year!

Olivia Sharp

Partner, Human Resources Practice

Olivia specialises in Executive Search for our HR Practice. Her practitioner background in HR, gained in various senior positions in a FTSE100 organisation, combined with her extensive general management experience, gives our HR Practice a unique offering for clients and candidates alike.

A Chartered Member of the CIPD, Olivia has a specialist interest in mental health and its relationship with individual and organisational performance, along with discrimination, diversity and inclusion in the workplace. She also brings first-hand experience of delivering business turnarounds as well as wide-scale people and cultural change.

A skilled HR generalist, Olivia has strong leadership and team development experience, having used a broad spectrum of leadership assessment tools and techniques. Olivia leads search activity across the full HR spectrum, from generalist to specialist roles, and has a particular focus on leadership roles with a strong track record in multisite commercial enterprise, not-for-profit organisations, unionised environments, and the energy sector.

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