

REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY - PART 1 - WELCOME TO THE AGE OF ANXIETY

If you think workplace anxiety is just about deadlines and difficult bosses, you're missing the bigger picture.

Anxiety isn't just creeping into work - it's crashing through the walls and it's not just about performance pressure. The world itself is feeding our stress. Global events. Political chaos. Social upheaval. These aren't just headlines, they're shaping how we show up, how we focus, and how we lead.

I used to think anxiety was for other people. People who panicked before big presentations or lost sleep over imposter syndrome. That wasn't me. But looking back, I see it now - I wasn't immune, my anxiety just had different triggers. It wasn't the day-to-day grind that got me, it was moments when the world felt unstable, when uncertainty took over, when the future felt like it was slipping out of my control.

I felt it in 2008 when every company seemed to be cutting jobs, and I couldn't shake the fear that I might be next. I felt it in 2020 when my wife was pregnant at the height of COVID, and every decision felt like life or death. I feel it every election season, when the stakes feel impossibly high and the fear of "what happens next" starts to eat at my focus, my energy, and my ability to lead.

These aren't just my moments, they're our moments and if you think your employees, your team aren't feeling the same weight, you're not paying attention. Anxiety isn't just a personal struggle anymore, it's a workplace reality and if we don't start acknowledging it, we're going to pay the price in engagement, trust, and performance.

Why Workplace Anxiety Demands Attention

Anxiety isn't just uncomfortable, it's **expensive**.

You can't see it on a spreadsheet, but it's there. **Lower productivity. Missed deadlines. Half-hearted work. Employees who show up physically but aren't fully present.**

And the numbers back it up:

- Anxiety and depression **cost the global economy \$1.0 trillion annually** in lost productivity (WHO).
- 75% of employees report low to moderate energy at work, and **32% feel emotionally numb throughout the day.**
- For Gen Z, anxiety is even more acute - **nearly half** report significant workplace stress.

This isn't just about mental health awareness, it's about **the bottom line**. Anxious employees don't bring their best thinking, their best creativity, or their best problem-solving, they play it safe, they withdraw and they second-guess themselves.

Unchecked anxiety leads to **presenteeism**, where people clock in but contribute at half capacity. Unlike absenteeism, presenteeism is **invisible**, but it's just as damaging. Imagine a team where even 20% of employees are mentally checked out. Now, picture the drag that creates on performance, innovation, and morale.

If you're leading a team and ignoring workplace anxiety, you're making a mistake. You don't have to be a therapist, you don't have to solve people's personal struggles, but you do have to recognize that anxiety isn't going away and work shouldn't be making it worse.

The good news? **You have more control than you think.**

The Seven Drivers of Workplace Anxiety

Anxiety at work doesn't come out of nowhere. It has **root causes**, and most of them are **structural, not personal**. Employees aren't just "stressed people," they're reacting to what's happening **inside and outside** of work.

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Here are the seven biggest drivers of workplace anxiety:

1. Personal Hardships - When Life Doesn't Pause at Work

Employees bring **everything** with them: illness, financial stress, relationship struggles, caregiving responsibilities. You can't tell someone to "leave it at the door," that's not how people work. The stress of a sick family member, a looming divorce, or mounting debt doesn't magically disappear during business hours. Even the most engaged employees struggle to focus when personal hardships take center stage. **If leaders don't acknowledge this reality, employees will feel isolated, unsupported, and increasingly disengaged.**

2. Societal Tensions - When the Outside World Divides Your Team

Politics. Culture wars. Global conflicts. What's happening out there doesn't stay out there. It shows up in conversations, team dynamics, and workplace culture, whether leaders acknowledge it or not. Employees don't just leave their beliefs, values, and fears at the office door. Some feel silenced, afraid to share their opinions. Others bring their frustrations into work, creating **divisiveness, tension, and even resentment**. If leaders don't set the tone for **respect, empathy, and open communication**, teams fracture and that anxiety seeps into everyday interactions.

3. Economic Uncertainty - When Job Security Feels Fragile

The economy wobbles, and employees feel it. Layoff rumors, shrinking budgets, rising costs - **financial stress follows people into work and impacts everything from engagement to risk-taking**. Even when employees technically have job security, the fear of losing their livelihood makes them hesitant to take risks, advocate for themselves, or focus on long-term growth. They shift into survival mode, which fuels burnout, erodes creativity, and makes even small setbacks feel catastrophic. A paycheck isn't just a paycheck, it's stability, safety, and a future. When that feels threatened, anxiety takes over.

4. Toxic Work Environments - The Cost of Fear and Distrust

When people don't feel safe to **speak up, make mistakes, or challenge ideas**, anxiety takes over. Fear driven workplaces don't create excellence, they create **burnout, turnover, and silent disengagement**. Employees in toxic environments spend more energy **protecting themselves** than doing their best work. They hesitate to contribute, fearing criticism. They avoid tough conversations, worried about backlash. They watch others get publicly shamed or undermined and think, I need to play it safe. Over time, **trust erodes, performance dips, and employees either check out or leave altogether**.

5. Unclear Priorities & Overwhelming Workloads - When Everything Feels Urgent

If everything is a priority, **nothing** is a priority. **Lack of clarity leads to exhaustion**. Employees constantly feel like they're behind, like they're failing, even when they're working harder than ever and when workloads spiral out of control, anxiety skyrockets. People start to dread their inbox, knowing that every unread email could bring another "urgent" request. Meetings pile up, deadlines blur together and the to-do list never gets shorter. The result? **Stress, burnout, and a constant feeling of being underwater, no matter how much effort they put in.**

6. Imposter Syndrome & Self-Doubt - When Good Employees Don't Feel Good Enough

Even the most talented employees **question their worth**. Without intervention, imposter syndrome fuels **overwork, hesitation, and burnout**, draining your best people before they even realize it. Employees who feel like frauds **push themselves to the breaking point**, believing they need to prove they belong. They overprepare, hesitate to speak up, and second-guess every decision, and when they do succeed, they chalk it up to luck, not skill. **If organizations don't actively create cultures that normalize learning, failure, and growth, imposter syndrome will keep holding people back.**

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7. Resistance to Change & Uncertainty - When the Unknown Feels Like a Threat

Change isn't the problem - **poorly managed** change is. When leaders fail to communicate, employees don't just feel uneasy, they feel **powerless** and powerlessness is the perfect breeding ground for anxiety. Even positive changes, new leadership, reorgs, or company growth can feel like a **threat** when employees don't know what's coming next. Will their role change? Will they still have a job? Will they have the skills to keep up? **Without clear, consistent communication, employees don't just struggle to adapt—they spiral.**

A Roadmap for Addressing Workplace Anxiety

Anxiety at work isn't just an individual problem, it's a **systemic** one. And systemic problems need **structural solutions**.

Over the next several articles, we're going to break down each of these seven sources of anxiety, not just **what they are, but why they happen**, how they impact employees and, most importantly, **what leaders can actually do about them**.

We'll cover:

- Why these issues are so common in workplaces today.
- How they erode trust, engagement and performance.
- Practical strategies for addressing them without turning leadership into therapy.

Because here's the thing: **we can't eliminate anxiety from life**. We can't stop employees from worrying about the economy, the news, or their personal struggles, but we can create work environments where anxiety **isn't amplified**. Where employees feel **clear, supported, and empowered** to bring their best every day.

This isn't just about mental health, it's about **making work a place where people can thrive**, because when employees are **constantly anxious**, they aren't innovating. They aren't thinking strategically. They aren't doing their best work.

So, let's tackle this head-on. **No fluff. No vague advice. Just clear strategies that make work better for everyone.**

Because workplace anxiety **isn't inevitable**. And it's time we stop treating it like it is.

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