Transcript - In Conversation with Unilever's Geoff McDonald – Removing stigma around mental ill health

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Host 00:03
Welcome to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learning's Tom Ritchie.

Tom 00:18
Today I'm joined by Geoff McDonald, the former Global Vice President of HR at Unilever and a mental health campaigner. Geoff worked for Unilever for over 25 years before leaving his position to become a champion of healthy workplaces.

Tom 00:31
In January 2008, Geoff experienced a panic attack that led him to being diagnosed as having anxiety-fueled depression. In this podcast, I speak to Geoff about his own experiences of mental ill health, how we can address stigma in business and the practical steps you can take to help support your employees' wellbeing.

Tom 00:51
Hi Geoff, thanks so much for joining us on this Future Talent podcast. I'd just like to start with your own story in regards to mental health. Your work as a mental health campaigner has been influenced by your own experiences.

Tom 01:05
So yeah, if we could just start with your own story of your experiences with mental health.

Geoff 01:09
Yeah, Tom, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to talk about this. So look, my story is a story which is which which kind of, I suppose, shows the power of being able to talk about mental ill health.

Geoff 01:24
And my story goes back to sort of 2008, when I got very, very ill with anxiety fuelled depression. I had a relapse in 2010. But what kept me alive during those periods was my ability to talk about my illness.

Geoff 01:40
Because what I got in response when I spoke to people about my illness was I got tremendous support. But more importantly, I experienced unbelievable sense of love. You know, how much I was loved by so many people.

Geoff 01:56
And I suppose during some of those very dark days, knowing that I was loved by so many people is what kept me alive. And have I not been able to talk about my illness and experience that love? I might not be here today.

Geoff 02:10
And then in October of 2012, a very good friend of mine took his own life. And I lay in bed that night and I kind of thought to myself, what's the difference between me and him? And the difference was my ability to talk about my illness and him not being able to talk about his illness.

Geoff 02:27
And that, you know, that then led him to take his own life. And I and I kind of thought to myself, stigma has just killed my friend, you know, and that's not fair. It just can't be fair. And that sort of that that led me to a kind of a sense of purpose that I have right now, which is, you know, I just want to create workplaces all over the world where people feel that they genuinely have the choice to put their hand up and ask for help if they're suffering from a mental illness.

Geoff 02:56
Because we know that in every single workplace everywhere in the world, if someone's suffering from a physical illness, they'll put their hand up and ask for help and support. So why not if it's a mental illness, particularly in the 21st century, you know, when we've got artificial intelligence, we put people on the moon, we're putting we're putting motor cars into the space now.

Geoff 03:15

You know, yet we can't talk about our mental ill health in the workplace. And so I suppose it was his his loss. My realization of the power stigma had, which really spurred me to go out and to begin to advocate campaign to normalizing mental ill health in workplaces.

Tom 03:35

And that issue of stigma is one that is and that story is one that I can really relate to. I lost a friend about three years ago to suicide as well. And it kind of made me think about stigma in a different way.

Tom 03:53

You know, this is someone who I was very, very close to. Couldn't verbalize it to me or any of our other close friends. But I take inspiration from the fact that you were able to use that as a launching pad for what you do.

Tom 04:06

So could you just talk about that a little bit more? How the death of your friend in 2012 kind of helped you to carry on with this purpose.

Geoff 04:16

You know, you know, that night, I mean, I didn't know where to start because of course, I felt a sense of injustice that that stigma had had killed my friend. Yeah. But, you know, I'm a South African living in the UK.

Geoff 04:27

My network is a bunch of South Africans. My other network is inside Unilever. So how was I going to have any impact? But at the time, a guy by the name of Alistair Campbell was doing a lot of advocacy and campaigning work.

Geoff 04:41

And, you know, Alistair is a very high profile individual in the UK and he was campaigning and advocating in this area. And so that night I thought to myself, you know what, I'm just I've got nothing to lose.

Geoff 04:52

I'm just going to send him an email because if I can meet with him, he might he might then be able to open all sorts of doors, introduce me to the right people, which will get me onto this path of campaigning and advocating.

Geoff 05:04

And so I went on to his website. I found an email. I sent it to him within 10 minutes. He'd responded a week later. We met up in Belsize Park. And ever since that day, he did exactly that. You know, he opened doors.

Geoff 05:15

He connected me to people, which then gave me that that sort of jumpstart, as it were. I mean, it gave me a bit of a path to follow to begin to advocate and campaign. So had I not sent that email, yeah, maybe I maybe I would never have got onto this path.

Geoff 05:29

But it was his inspiration and his support which allowed me to begin to do what I what I continue to do today.

Tom 05:37

And that openness that willing to talk about. So in your role at Unilever, you were the global VP of HR. And obviously, that's a very high leadership role within the business. And you would be expected to kind of be the first port of call for someone within the business who might be experiencing an issue with their mental health.

Tom 06:00

So how did it feel to kind of when you did open yourself up to the business at large, how did that feel to kind of lean on other people in the company?

Geoff 06:11

Yeah, it's an interesting concept that you've raised. You know, I call it a double stigma. So, you know, often if you look in the NHS, nurses, you know, there they are supposed to be caring for everybody.

Geoff 06:23

The stigma around mental ill health is even stronger because there's kind of this double stigma. You the carer, so, you know, how could you ever be suffering from an illness? And so, I mean, you know what?

Geoff 06:36
I mean, when I opened up about my illness, the love and the support that I got, people feeling how courageous I was that I was able to talk about my illness. In fact, it kind of, I didn't feel a sense of weakness.

Geoff 06:54
I felt a sense of courage that I was able to do this. And because I had this lived experience, I, therefore, was able to provide a huge amount of support, encouragement, advice and guidance to people who then might want to lean on me, you know, as you described.

Tom 07:18
Yeah. And could you give some examples of some of the initiatives that you would have launched at Unilever during your time there?

Geoff 07:26
You know, and you know, I mean, again, Tom, you know, this isn't something that just kind of came out of the blue that we decided we're going to launch an approach to addressing the stigma of mental health in Unilever.

Geoff 07:38
I mean, I was lucky in in that in the first instance, you know, at a strategic level within the organisation, you know, we were all about a company that was wanting to improve the health and the well being of a billion people through our brands.

Geoff 07:53
You know, it was part of our purpose as an organisation. And so, you know, I was also there was a guy by the name of Tim Munden, who was the head of HR in the UK at the time, and he was a huge advocate and supporter and wanting to do something in the area of of mental health within Unilever.

Geoff 08:13
And so we had this, you know, we almost had this this hook where we could where we could go to the senior leaders in the organisation and say, look, you know, we're talking about improving the health and well being of a billion people in the world.

Geoff 08:25
Well, we've got some data to show that we are, we've got some major issues within our own organisation and their well being. And, you know, charity starts at home. So if we want to do that, we better make sure we're looking after the well being of our own people.

Geoff 08:38
And, you know, that that together with using somebody like Alistair Campbell to come in and do a talk in the organisation, which then which then catalyzed and provoked a lot of conversation around mental health.

Geoff 08:55
Together with the data, together with the strategic imperative was the launch pad. It was it was the kind of it allowed us to then say, OK, let's now begin to address the stigma of mental health within union either.

Tom 09:11
And as a general overview of UK business as a whole, when we're talking about stigma, one in four people of working age in the UK will experience an issue with their mental health at some point in their lifetime, why is the stigma still so prevalent in certain organisations?

Tom 09:32
And is it worse when you get to the top levels of business?

Geoff 09:38
The first thing that I would say is, and Alistair Campbell says this all the time. It's one in one. People who suffer from mental ill health. Yeah, we all have we're all mental and we're all physical.

Geoff 09:52

It's not one in four. You know, all of us wake up some days feeling very anxious and then we're OK the next day. Yeah. So we all suffer a different and milder and more extreme forms. And yes, maybe the extreme form, you know, of being clinically depressed or general anxiety disorder.

Geoff 10:13

Yes, maybe that is one in four. But, you know, I think we need to we need to recognize that we're all mental and we're all physical and we all get ill. It just varies in terms of of how ill we get. So coming back to why there is why there is stigma.

Geoff 10:29

Look, I think that there are a couple of things here. So the first is I just think it's a lack of education. You know, people just people don't know. I mean, I never knew what depression was when I got ill.

Geoff 10:43

I mean, I'd never heard of general anxiety disorder. I didn't know what the symptoms were. And so I think the stigma is driven by a significant lack of education and understanding. And, you know, as we begin to understand the brain more and we understand all these things, you know, I think that slowly as we educate people more in this particular area, I think we begin to see less stigma.

Geoff 11:11

I also think that, you know, I think it does get more difficult to talk about your mental ill health. The more senior you become in organisations, because first of all, you know, those sort of people who are really senior, you know, they're supposed to be tough and macho and, you know, they've made it.

Geoff 11:32

And so therefore, you know, to to be suffering from depression or anxiety is kind of a real chink in the armor. And also, I think that there's there is still a perception out there that that particular individual then might be a risk to the organisation and to the ability of the organisation to perform.

Geoff 11:53

And so I think I think that there are, you know, I think as we educate people more and also I think the other thing that we have to start doing to break the stigma is we've got to shift the narrative around mental health.

Geoff 12:08

Do you know what I mean? That the narrative around mental health is so negative. You know, even when I use the word mental health, people immediately go to the negative. They go to depression, anxiety, bipolar.

Geoff 12:20

But when I use the word physical health, you don't immediately go to cancer, diabetes,

Tom 12:26

You talk about diet, exercise.

Geoff 12:27

Yeah, you talk about positive things around physical health. But when I say mental health people immediately go to the negative. Or you walk into a Nike store and there on the walls or chiselled whippets the most beautiful looking bodies.

Tom 12:38

Yeah

Geoff 12:39

And you feel inspired to do something so that your body can look like that So you're going to do a bit of the exercise when it comes to mental health.

Geoff 12:45

There's nothing Inspirational on aspirational around maintaining your mental health, you know, the images are all so negative black and white photographs. And so I think we've got to shift the narrative, where we begin to see mental health mental fitness as a as a real positive and a competitive advantage, you know in a world and in a commercial environment

where knowledge and the use of our minds and cognitive health is is is a competitive advantage today.

Geoff 13:14
So so I think there's an education piece that needs to be addressed right across organisations, just like we've done with safety and how we've created more so that so that we begin to break the stigma. And then I think there's a whole piece around the narrative shifting the narrative and making it more positive.

Tom 13:30
And where does the, where does the buck stop for the education surrounding mental health? Is it something that you think should be implemented from as early an age as possible and then continues all the way through into the workplace?

Tom 13:43
Is it a whole systemic change that needs to happen?

Geoff 13:47
You know, so I think that I think we've got to see it in schools starting in primary schools, you know continuing the education through into secondary. And you know, I I and I think then we would have less of an issue of educating in corporates, you know, but because we've all missed the primary and secondary education around mental health we now having to invest big time in trying to create and create a basic appreciation around things like what is depression?

Geoff 14:19
What is anxiety? What is stress? What are the symptoms to look out for? But imagine if we'd been taught about all of that stuff in primary school and secondary school I also think that there would be less stigma and so yeah organisations would would not have this need to begin to educate. But in the absence of that, you know, we've done it with safety. You can't go into any company and join any company without having without going on some kind of safety course or getting some kind of basic appreciation around safety because it's so important that we create safe workplaces.

Geoff 14:51
But the time has come for us to create healthy workplace. You know, and so therefore why as part of your induction into a company, you know, one of the first things that should be part of that induction along with the safety induction is a health induction and let's talk about mental health in it, you know, and let's give it the focus because we've done a bit on physical. And we call it health and safety, we've invested all our time all our energy in safety. The millions and billions that have been invested has all gone to safety.

Geoff 15:22
What about investing some of it in health?

Tom 15:26
Yeah. And just to kind of get some really practical points on that, what would you what would you suggest in an infrastructure kind of kind of guise, I guess, for a leader who's looking to improve the well being of their employees in the workplace?

Geoff 15:45
You know, Tom, that's a really, really good question. I think the first thing that I've got to say is that, is that our wellbeing is driven by four factors. And I think we've got to look at wellbeing in a much more holistic way.

Geoff 16:02
You know, so it's not good enough just to look after your physical wellbeing. We need to look after our physical wellbeing. We need to look after our emotional wellbeing. We need to look after our mental wellbeing.

Geoff 16:13
And we need to think about having a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives, right? And we've got to address all of those things. Now, in order to address the mental wellbeing aspect of wellbeing, we've got to address the stigma.

Geoff 16:29
And in order to address the stigma, organisations and corporates out there have got to start investing in the education piece, in shifting the narrative, getting people to talk openly in their organisations and become role models and become the Usain Bolts of mental health.

Geoff 16:48
And we've got to make sure that we've got resources in place that people can draw on to enhance their mental health or if they get ill, you know, know where to go and where to get support. Okay, so that is absolutely essential and a kind of prerequisite.

Geoff 17:06
But in order for wellbeing to be of strategic importance to an organisation, because in a lot of the companies that I consult to today, where I'm advocating and campaigning, wellbeing is still a tick box exercise.

Geoff 17:23
It is still, I see it as companies kind of saying, oh, well, you know, we look after the wellbeing of our people because we have apples in the canteen and we give people discounts to gym membership and we run a wellbeing week once a year.

Geoff 17:39
It's not good enough for me. I mean, it's not sticking. And I think the reason that it's not sticking is there are two reasons. And that is, I don't think that we have in organisations seen the importance of energy as a driver of performance.

Geoff 17:57
So we've spent years focusing on skills, knowledge and behaviours. But for me, energy is the most important driver of performance. When somebody is energised, passionate, it can be an extroverted energy or an introverted energy, but when they've got capacity, energy and passion, they perform like you won't believe.

Geoff 18:14
And I think we should now start to build that into our performance, into the infrastructure. So in our performance management conversations with people, we should be having conversations about people's energy.

Geoff 18:25
And we can do it now because we know what gives people energy. It's their wellbeing, those four aspects that I spoke about, physical, emotional, mental and purpose. We can also measure it now. So now we can measure people's energy.

Geoff 18:38
And imagine now having development conversations with people about their energy, about their emotional health, about their mental health. And your point about building it into the infrastructure, that's what's got to happen now.

Geoff 18:51
And so the infrastructure I would like to see this built into is into our performance management infrastructure. It's about the ethos in this organisation. We recognise energy as important, if not more important, than knowledge, skills, behaviours.

Geoff 19:06
And so therefore we are going to hold people accountable for their energy. We as an organisation are going to put the resources and the infrastructure in place to enhance people's energy, because you can't hold somebody accountable for their energy if you aren't as an organisation creating the right environment and the right resources for them to feel that they can draw on those to become energised.

Geoff 19:24
And so then what you do is what we've now done is we've driven some individual accountability around energy or wellbeing and organisational accountability. And today there's no organisational accountability to enhance the wellbeing of people, and there is no individual accountability for individuals to feel that they should look after their wellbeing.

Tom 19:44
In people's work that they feel energized to kind of go out there and do the best work that they can for an organisation.

Geoff 19:53
Yeah. That's why coming back to, you know, if you, if you use this framework that I talk about around what is it that drives individual wellbeing, it is physical, emotional, mental, and have you got purpose.

Geoff 20:06
But that framework, you can also apply it to an organisational level. So you can overlay that framework and say, so what are

you as an organisation doing to enhance the physical, the emotional, the mental, and have you as an organisation created a sense of purpose?

Geoff 20:20
And if you haven't, you need to, because it's part of enhancing the energy of your people in this organisation. It's not the only thing because people have also got to look after their mental health, their emotional health, and their physical health to be energized.

Geoff 20:34
But as an organisation, you do need to begin to think about creating that sense of purpose. But you know, if you want to get these conversations going, the only way you start to get these conversations, these sorts of conversations going is if it's part of the, of the performance management system.

Geoff 20:53
And I don't want it to be seen as a kind of, you know, a stick that if you've got no energy, I'm going to fire you. Just like if you haven't got any skills and you went on the training course and you didn't improve, I'd fire you.

Geoff 21:03
I want to position this in a more developmental way, which is kind of saying we're putting huge demands on people in workplaces today. But guess what? We recognize that. We know that energy is such an important driver of performance.

Geoff 21:16
And so we are now going to work with you and provide the resources for you to develop and to grow and to maintain your energy in this demanding environment that we're creating. And absolutely purpose and organisational purpose is one part of that equation, but it's not the only.

Geoff 21:34
I've got to have an organisation that is, that has broken the stigma around mental ill health. I've got an organisation that recognizes the importance of enhancing the emotional health and giving resources to enhance people's emotional health.

Geoff 21:45
And I've got an organisation which for years they've done it. They provide resources to enhance people's physical health. So let's go on a holiday around physical health now in organisations, and let's focus on emotional, mental and purpose.

Tom 21:58
Thanks so much for speaking with us with us today.

Host 22:04
You've been listening to Future Talent Learning's In Conversation podcast. Thank you for joining us. If you've enjoyed this episode, please check out the other conversations we're having with leaders and thinkers about the changing world of work.