

Episode 017: 3 Holiday Blues Team Members May Be Facing

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

Regardless of what holidays you observe, this season we're in is typically framed in terms of cheer and joy, of festivities and comfort, of wishes and giving, of serving and being with those we love. And I love that feeling and atmosphere, but those aren't the only feelings that happen during the holiday season.

Remember, while work is made up of process, organizations are made up of people, and with people comes emotions.

So since you're managing and leading and influencing people, you should be aware of some of the struggles your team members might be facing during this time, especially since the pandemic has likely increased the occurrences of struggle. So today, I'm going to walk you through three holiday blues your team members might be facing.

First, let's talk about grief. Now, you may know that in May of this year, at the age of 62, my dad had a heart attack and died.

And so we are in our year of firsts. The first holidays without him.

And while there are plenty of happy, joyful things we're going to be celebrating and doing as a family, grief doesn't just pause for the holidays. In fact, my experience is that grief is even more intense as we go through family traditions with someone missing.

My friend Allison lost her mom this year. My friend Tiffany lost her dad this year. My friend Ryan lost his mom this year. They're all going through their first holidays. And those are just a handful of people that I know who experienced this loss from the normal course of diseases.

That doesn't count the more than 1.3 million deaths worldwide of human beings or the more than 250,000 Americans who died as a result of COVID-19, nor does it count the continuing grief that happens in subsequent years for millions of people who feel lost just a tinge bit more during the holidays. So I want you to remember, some of your team members may be experiencing grief and sadness this holiday season.

Now look, you don't have to solve it for them. You're not a therapist, and you don't have to try to cheer them up, but you should be aware of it. Listen, and connect.

So the first holiday blues your team members may face is grief.

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The second relates to mental health or maybe mental wellness, and it can show up in a few different ways. Now I know that there are diagnosed mental illness impacts out there, and I am not qualified to talk about those. But even those folks who aren't necessarily diagnosed with mental illness, they may experience changes in their overall mental health or their mental wellbeing during the holidays, that mental and emotional wellbeing. So first of all, those battling addictions or those working to maintain sobriety, the holidays can be a tough time for that. And even though holiday parties full of alcohol may be less frequent this year, other impacts from the year may continue to challenge those that are in recovery.

The holidays can bring heavy doses of emotions due to family dynamics. Whether it's anger or resentment or maybe guilt, there's a lot of things that can come up for families through the holidays. And for those who are single or live alone, loneliness can creep in at a higher level. That's a boat that I've been in. As a single person who lives alone in my house, I usually would only fly back to Georgia for either Thanksgiving or Christmas but not both. I mean, those holidays are too close together. Who thought that up? Now I will tell you this year I am spending both holidays with family for some added emotional support. But typically, it's only one, which means one of those holidays I'm not around any family member.

Now being home alone, I've had lots of different experiences. I've gone to friends' homes and shared the holiday with their families. I've grabbed a friend and hit the slopes, got up and gone skiing or snowboarding on Thanksgiving Day. I've volunteered for half the day. I've cooked a great meal for myself, though full transparency, I think I did that once. Not really loving being in the kitchen myself. I have treated myself to the fancy expensive meal out. I've spent more on a meal there than any time before. And I've also at times, sat at home by myself on a holiday feeling lonely.

Now, this type of loneliness is something that some unknown people, some unknown number of people feel each holiday season, and it's going to happen even more often this year. Because of the pandemic, some people won't be able to travel to spend the holiday with their family. Because of the pandemic, some people won't even be able to gather with local family over the holidays due to the health risks associated, especially as we see cases rising leading up to the holidays. Some people will feel isolated this year.

Even people who are married and have kids and a full house of holiday cheer, they may still experience waves of isolation or loneliness or sadness if they are able to carry on their traditions with extended family this year. Now, this is not a problem you need to try to fix. I just want you to recognize that some of your team members may struggle with mental wellness related challenges during this holiday season, whether it's temptation of substance abuse, emotions from family dynamics, increased levels of loneliness, or new feelings of isolation.

All right, so we talked about grief, we talked about some different impacts to mental health and wellness.

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The third holiday blues your team members may be facing is financial pressure. And this may vary based on what holidays your family celebrates, and the traditions in your family and culture. The thing is that many people want to give in ways that involve spending money - they want to buy and give gifts. I know I do. I mean, figuring out the perfect, most thoughtful gift for someone and then giving it to them, it really truly brings me joy.

Maybe this desire to spend money comes from the joy involved, maybe it comes out of a feeling of obligation, maybe it comes from social pressure, maybe it comes from a feeling of guilt, of wanting to provide your kids or your family members in ways that other families are doing. And lots of families end up putting Christmas on credit cards, only to spend the rest of the following year paying it off.

Now look, not everyone faces financial pressures. Maybe you're in a financial situation where you have plenty of expendable income. Or maybe you're not, but you were raised or have chosen for yourself to live from a place of abundance and gratitude that pushes that feeling of want and neediness away. But some people in your span of care, they do face added stress and worry, maybe some guilt. And this year, the pandemic is increasing it.

Some families will worry about money over the holidays for the first time in years, or maybe even ever. And some families always worry a little bit, but this year, things are even tighter. Whether income has been lost or reduced, or maybe it hasn't, but the uncertainty of what will happen in the economy next year is enough to cause someone to tighten up, to spend a little less.

My income reduced in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. And while I am grateful to not feel stressed about finances during the holidays, I am treating the holidays a little differently this year. I'm trying to continue to give to charities at the same rate but spending a bit less on gifts for family and friends or decor or outings. Just kind of pulling back just a little bit. Now financial pressure during holidays, the stress or the guilt or the shame, it's real. Now it's not your job to solve it but it is your job to be aware of it. Just to know that somebody in your span of care is facing added stress or shame or guilt.

All right, let's recap. The three holiday blues your team members may be facing are grief, gaps in mental wellness, and financial stress.

So why am I talking about this today? Look, you might be totally aware of all of this because you're living it and you don't need this episode. But maybe you're aware of it but it's not something you're personally facing, or that's manifesting as holiday blues for you. The thing is, while you're aware of it, maybe you just sometimes forget and so you might not check in with your team as much as you should, or as much as you want to, or you might not recognize it enough to stop and listen, that's okay.

That's why I'm talking about it, because I want to raise awareness, I want to shine a light on it. Or maybe you haven't been exposed to these things, maybe you haven't thought about it, and maybe if I hadn't said

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something, it never would have crossed your mind that some people don't love the holidays. And you may have gone out yelling cheer and joy and festivities without recognizing that some people cringe at that.

Look, it doesn't mean you can't be cheerful or share your joy, you should. You should also be aware. You know your team so pay attention. If someone seems like they're not themselves for the holidays, check in with them. And all of this checking in with them, it's not a time for you to talk, it's a time for you to listen. It's a time for you to share empathy, most of which by the way, happens in the nonverbal.

So here's your next step. I want you to spend five minutes processing what you heard today, and you don't have to do anything. Just process it. Just push everything else out and spend five minutes processing what you heard. And listen to your own cues. Listen to your intuition, your own responses in your mind and your body. That will guide you as to whether you need to take a next step.

Now look, I love the holiday season. I love the music and the movies and the lights and the cheerfulness. I love the colors and the decorations. I love the opportunity to give and share and spend time with people I love. Let me tell you, you know what, my Christmas tree went up after Halloween.

As soon as Halloween was over, November 1st hit, I'm like, "Going up." That's how much I love it.

But I also struggle sometimes with the things I talked about today. It's a mixed bag. Those positive emotions of love and joy, of gratefulness and inspiration, of pride and belonging, those don't feel the same if we never feel the not so great emotions of fear and anger, of loneliness and despair, of grief and guilt. It's a mixed bag.

That's part of the human experience. We're people, and your organization is made up of people. Business is personal and leadership is a relationship.