Are You OK?

Mental health has become a critical conversation, but how can leaders truly walk the walk? Here, six founders share experiences that showed them the way.

1 / Open up to connect deeply.

"When I was diagnosed with testicular cancer at 32, I took just one day off work for the surgery—one of my biggest regrets. But something changed when I came out the other side. For the first time in my life, I could open up about my inner demons. In time, empathy took root where resentment had festered, and I had the urge to go below the surface in conversations. I wanted to soothe others struggling to hide their pain. It made me a better leader."
—MATT HIGGINS, cofounder and CEO, RSE Ventures

2 / Make time off a company activity.

"A couple months into the pandemic, we closed our biggest funding round and acquisition to date. You could tell people were running incredibly hot, and after the deal closed, we shut down for a week. When everybody came back fresh and ready to get after it, I realized the mental toll they'd been suppressing. So a one-time reset became a holistic approach. Now, in addition to unlimited PTO, we shut down twice a year for a week, and on random days to focus on self-care."
—JOHN BERKOWITZ, founder and CEO, OJO Labs

3 / Ban egos.

"One thing we do at Oishii that truly makes an impact on our employees' mental health is an 'ego check' during the hiring process. We are committed to not hiring anyone with an ego or any red flags in their work style or personalities that even hint at possible toxicity, no matter how perfect for the job they may be. Our ability to stay true to this principle, I believe, has been imperative to building a strong, healthy culture as we've scaled to over 100 people."
—HIROKI KOGA, cofounder and CEO, Oishii

4 / Create spaces for honest feedback.

"I've realized that checking in with the younger members of my team and asking, 'How is the workload? Do you need support?' isn't likely to get an honest answer, especially in a remote environment. When I was younger, I would never have told my manager that I was burned out. So we're working to create more dedicated spaces for expressing this, asking questions like 'How many hours of sleep are you getting?' and 'What time are you signing off every night?'"
—STEPH HON, founder and CEO, Cadence

5 / Set limited, specific work hours.

"Being a parent while running a business destroyed everything that had worked for me in the past. I eventually reached a breaking point. But this led me to create better boundaries, which in turn influenced my approach to prioritizing mental health for the team at Fundid. One of my favorite things we do is set clear and specific work hours. We are all online from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday, and then everything is flexible outside of that."
—STEFANIE SAMPLE, founder and CEO, Fundid

6 / Communicate like crazy.

"When COVID first hit, my cofounder and I did everything we could to protect our team. What I failed to do was fully communicate our efforts. One day, on a call, I told a team member that all our roles were secure, and they started crying with relief. I was completely shocked. Others were justifiably scared as well, and it had taken a hit on their mental health. Now I'm overly communicative about the state of the business and more proactive in asking how people are."
—JANE FISHER, cofounder and co-CEO, Harper Wilde