

Case Study: Manager Well-Being Communication Guardrails (EarlyValue*)

Published 1 June 2021 - ID G00750025 - 8 min read

By Analyst(s): Total Rewards Research Team

Initiatives: [Total Rewards](#); [Employee Experience](#); [Risk and Control Resources for Internal Auditors](#)

Total rewards leaders can learn how EarlyValue equips managers with clear guidance on what to do, and more importantly what not to do, in order to effectively support employees' mental and emotional health.

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

- [Risk and Control Resources for Employee Wellness](#)

EarlyValue*

Company Name: EarlyValue*

Industry: Healthcare

Headquarters Location: Asia/Pacific

Employees: ~ 1,000

* Pseudonym.

Overview

Managers are often expected to provide frontline support when employees approach them with their emotional and mental well-being concerns. However, many managers are underequipped to effectively serve as a source of support in this area. Total rewards leaders can learn how EarlyValue provides managers with clear guardrails and coaching that clarifies what to say and do as well as what not to say or do. This helps prevent situations where the manager oversteps into the territory of mental health professionals, but ensures they can support their teams' mental and emotional health.

Solution Highlights

- **Manager-Employee Communication Do's and Don'ts:** EarlyValue coaches managers on what to say or do and, more importantly, on what not to say or do when offering well-being support. This prevents manager overreach or underinvolvement in employees' mental and emotional well-being.
- **Manager-Driven Well-Being Support:** Leaders are upskilled to take the initiative (build connections, identify signs and support employee well-being), and meet employees halfway by sharing the responsibility of communicating on mental health with their direct reports, instead of placing the entire onus on employees.
- **Continuous Mental Health Learning and Development Plan:** EarlyValue provides continuous, recurring training and support for managers to keep mental well-being priorities top of mind for managers without overwhelming them.
- **Personal Connections — A Precursor to Well-Being Support:** During manager coaching programs, EarlyValue emphasizes the importance of establishing personal connections with employees, since not all managers may have a natural disposition to maintaining strong connections with their employees. This helps managers spot early signs of needed support.
- **Well-Being Assessment Continuum:** EarlyValue reminds managers of the importance of assessing employees' mental health against a continuum to ensure they can support employees' mental and emotional well-being continuously instead of viewing it as a one-off event or issue.

Challenge

While employees continue to acknowledge the toll of mental and emotional health issues on their work, managers lack confidence in their ability to support the mental and emotional well-being of employees. Managers often find themselves overinvolved in employee issues that should be the province of mental health professionals. To avoid such scenarios, some managers choose to not engage with employees on their mental and emotional well-being at all and remain entirely disconnected.

Dos and Don'ts Help Avoid Manager Over- or Underinvolvement

While managers at several organizations feel they lack the skills to confidently address mental well-being issues, others are too willing to be involved in mental well-being. This raises risks of overinvolvement in employees' personal affairs, legal risks, and the risk of dispensing advice on mental health matters without the right qualifications to do so. To address these situations, EarlyValue developed a program to equip managers with the skills they need to play a role in addressing mental health while establishing clear boundaries for their involvement.

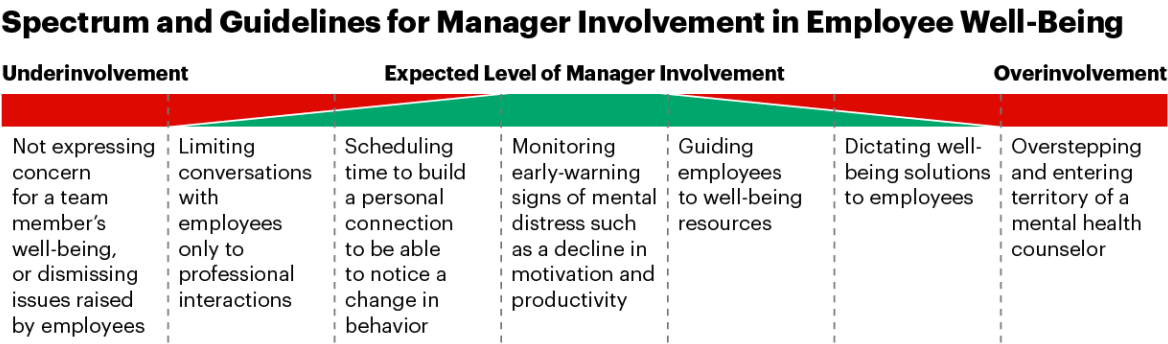
EarlyValue's do and don't guidelines (see Figure 1) clarify what to do, and more importantly, what not to do, when engaging with employees on mental and emotional health issues. These guidelines make it clear managers should:

- Build personal connections with employees in order to notice any behavioral changes, if they occur.
- Monitor early warning signs of mental distress (such as a decline in motivation).
- Guide employees to available well-being resources.

Similarly, managers are told to avoid:

- Dismissing issues raised by employees
- Limiting conversations with employees only to professional interactions
- Dictating the well-being solution(s) employees must use
- Acting as a mental health counselor.

Figure 1. Spectrum and Guidelines for Manager Involvement in Employee Well-Being



Source: Adapted From EarlyValue*
* Pseudonym.
750025_C



Relieving Employees of the Burden to Ask for Help

Since senior leaders are equipped with the guidelines and resources to support employees’ mental well-being, EarlyValue encourages managers to take the first step and proactively initiate mental-health-related conversations with their direct reports. EarlyValue’s well-being program places the onus on managers, empowering them to confidently take the initiative in communicating with employees about their mental and emotional well-being concerns. Under this approach, managers give employees “permission” to share their mental and emotional health concerns (see Figure 2). As part of this effort, managers are given tools such as conversation starters and guides to understand the appropriate ways to handle sensitive conversations or build personal connections with their employees.

Figure 2. Approaches to Manager Well-Being Communication

Approaches to Manager Well-Being Communication



Source: Adapted From EarlyValue*
* Pseudonym.
750025_C

For example, EarlyValue managers are given five conversation starters (see Figure 3) and are told to use them when initiating mental well-being conversations with their employees. The conversation starters equip leaders to feel more confident in their abilities to effectively support employee's mental and emotional health.

Figure 3. Well-Being Conversation Starters

Well-Being Conversation Starters

Conversation Starters:

- 1 How are you?
- 2 Thinking about what you have achieved lately, what are you most proud of?
- 3 What support would be most useful for you to ensure you are at your best?
- 4 What can you put in place to ensure you are taking care of your well-being?
- 5 Is there anything else you would like to chat about?

When to Use:

- When starting conversations
- To encourage employees to recognize their own success
- To indicate willingness to support your direct reports
- To ensure commitment to ongoing well-being support
- To build a personal connection with employees and direct reports

Source: Adapted From EarlyValue*

* Pseudonym.

750025_C

Gartner

Additionally, EarlyValue leverages “RUOK” conversation guides and tools that managers can use to address employees’ mental well-being in a range of situations. The guide includes tools that teach leaders how to ask if employees are okay, listen to employees with an open mind, and regularly check in and assess emotional health.

Excerpts of Manager-Employee Well-Being Conversation Guides

Ask, “Are You OK?”

Help employees open up by asking questions such as:

- “What’s been happening?”
- “I’ve noticed that you’re not quite yourself lately. How are you doing?”
- “With everything that is going on, you have been on my mind lately. How are you?”

What If They Don’t Want to Talk to Me?

- *Try not to take it personally if they don't want to talk. They might not be ready to talk, or it might take them time to realize you genuinely care.*
- *Respect their decision not to talk; don't force them into it or criticize them.*
- *Focus on some things they might be comfortable talking about, such as, "I know you've had trouble sleeping and concentrating lately. Can we talk about that?"*

Encourage Action

You could say:

- *"What do you think is a first step that would help you through this?"*
- *"Have you spoken to your doctor or another health professional about this? It might be a matter of finding the right fit with someone."*
- *"Is there anything you've tried in the past that's made you feel better when you've felt like this?"*

Check In

You could say:

- *"Hey, how have you been since we last chatted?"*
- *"Have things improved or changed since we last spoke?"*
- *"Do you need more support?"*

Managing Emotional Reactions During a Conversation

Things you can do to minimize awkwardness and reduce pressure:

- *Allow the person to fully express their emotions (i.e., let off steam) and show them you are interested by actively listening to all they say.*
- *Deal with emotions first, you can discuss the issues more rationally once emotions have been addressed.*
- *Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they are distressed.*

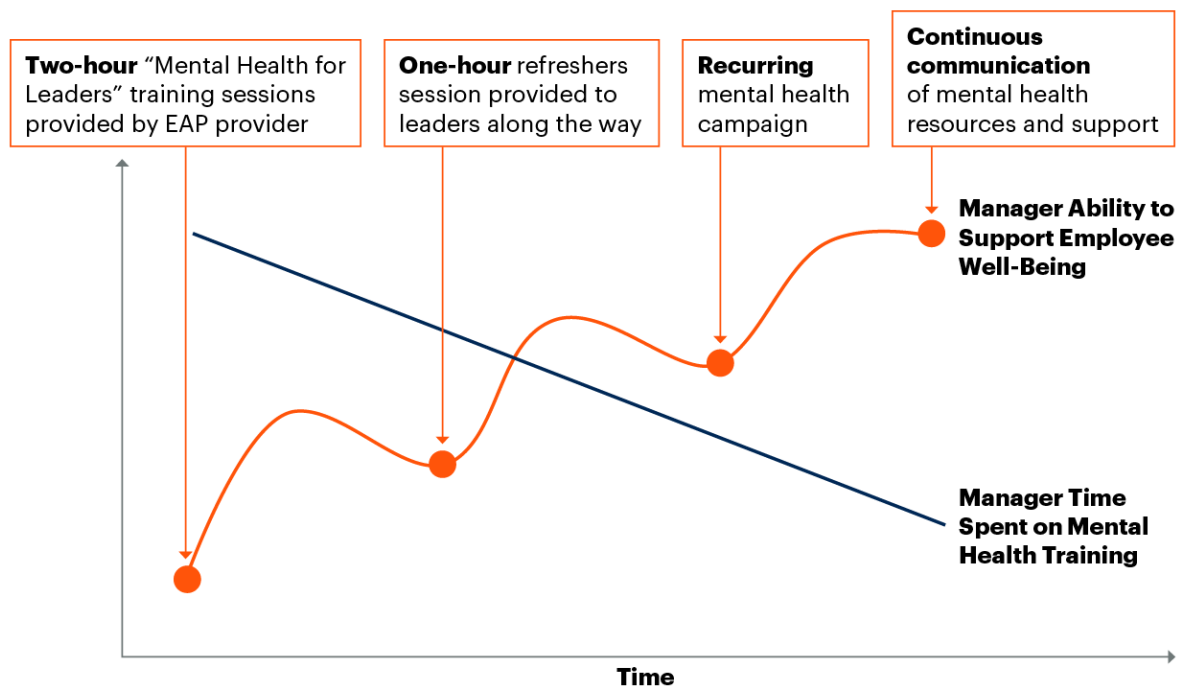
Recurring Training That Prioritizes Employees' Mental and Emotional Health

Once leaders are given the resources to be effective at supporting employee mental health, EarlyValue aims to ensure its organizationwide mental well-being initiative is kept alive and remains a top-of-mind priority for managers. EarlyValue's well-being program is a continuous discipline that requires periodic boosts throughout the year rather than requiring managers to dedicate large periods of time to training.

Leaders are given 10 intensive, two-hour training programs, which are followed by one-hour refreshers spread across the year. The embedded nature of EarlyValue's mental health campaign and leaders' unlimited access to mental health resources from the employee assistance program's (EAP's) provider increases managers' ability to support employees' mental and emotional well-being and reduces the time they spend on mental health training. EarlyValue's mental health campaigns are ongoing and spread out to make the sessions feasible for managers to attend (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Early Value's Continuous Mental Health Campaign

Early Value's* Continuous Mental Health Campaign



Source: Adapted From EarlyValue*

* Pseudonym.

750025_C

Personal Connections That Improve Manager Effectiveness

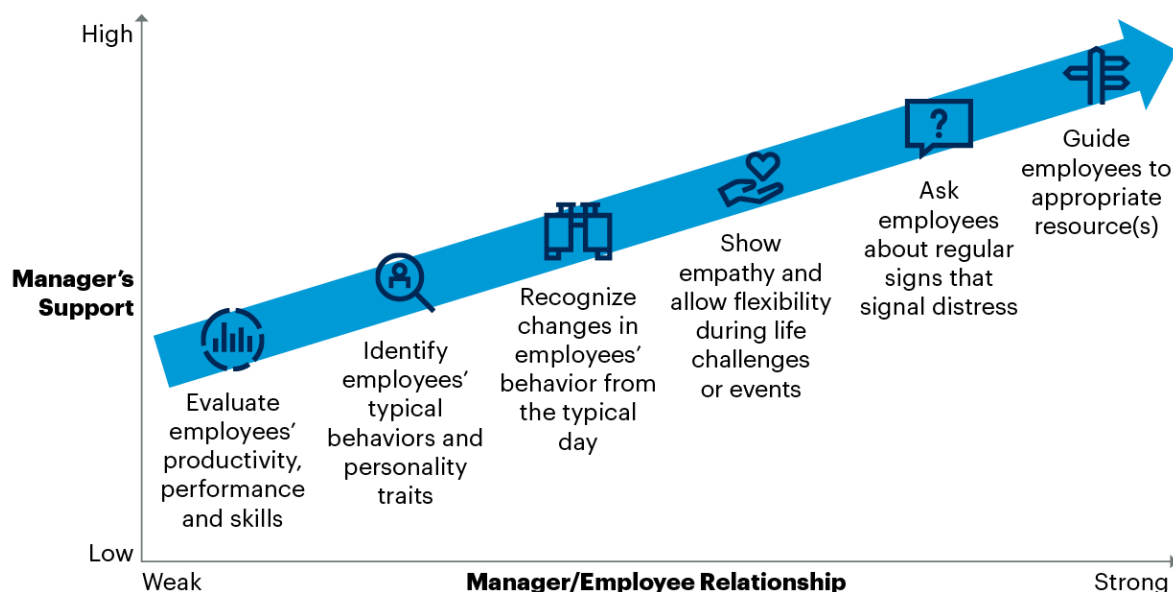
EarlyValue's entire well-being program is designed around developing manager capabilities to make them effective at mental health conversations with their employees. However, managers cannot effectively execute on their training or support the mental well-being of their employees unless they share a strong and existing personal connection with them. EarlyValue gives managers guidance on how to establish personal connection with their employees since not all managers will have the same natural disposition.

Relationships between managers and employees are strengthened when managers take progressive steps to build connections with their employees and try to understand them beyond solely observing them on work-related matters (see Figure 5). Managers build stronger relationships with employees when they:

- Proactively recognize changes in day-to-day employee behavior.
- Show empathy and allow flexibility during life challenges or events.
- Ask employees about regular signs that signal distress.
- Guide employees to available resources, when applicable.

Figure 5. Progressive Steps to Build Personal Connections

Progressive Steps to Build Personal Connections



Source: Adapted From EarlyValue*

* Pseudonym.

750025_C

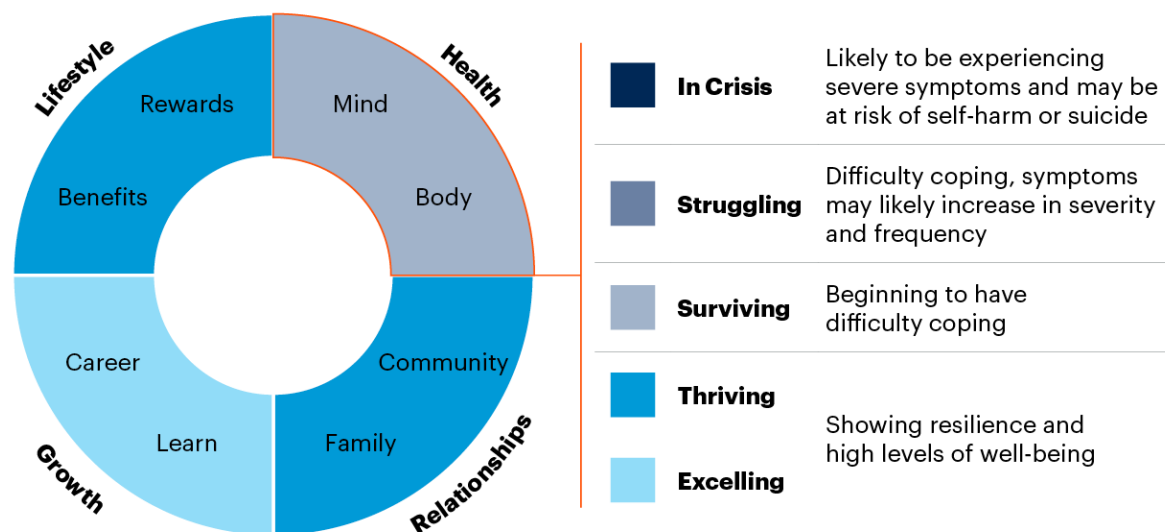
Gartner

Managers Taught to Evaluate Mental Health on a Spectrum

The last piece of guidance EarlyValue gives its managers is to evaluate employees on a mental health spectrum. EarlyValue's well-being pillars target four key factors: mental well-being, relationships, growth and financial well-being. The mental health aspect of the well-being program tries to assess emotional and mental health on a spectrum that can fluctuate from "in crisis" to "excelling" (see Figure 6). The spectrum reminds managers that mental and emotional health changes constantly and that they need to regularly check on whether or when employees need support.

Figure 6. Mental Well-Being Continuum

Mental Well-Being Continuum



Gartner

Results

EarlyValue's mental well-being program has been highly successful in improving managers' leadership abilities to respond to employee mental health concerns and in keeping employees engaged in their well-being. More employees are relying on EarlyValue's well-being initiatives – the employee assistance program is used 50% more than the industry average. EarlyValue has also reported a threefold increase in managers' knowledge, skill and ability to respond to employees' mental and emotional health needs.

Recommendations

To equip managers with the necessary skills and resources to respond to employee mental and emotional health needs, total rewards leaders should:

- Articulate clear communication guidelines that enable managers to function within defined boundaries of mental health conversations they are encouraged and discouraged from having.
- Schedule recurring well-being training sessions to ensure employee well-being remains a top priority for managers.

- To ensure managers can spot early signs of needed support, train them on various ways to build personal connections, trust and strong relationships with their employees.

About This Research

This case study is based on extensive interviews with EarlyValue's head of total rewards.

Presentation Deck

[Download presentation slides for this research.](#)

© 2022 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. and its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Gartner research may address legal and financial issues, Gartner does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Your access and use of this publication are governed by [Gartner's Usage Policy](#). Gartner prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party. For further information, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)."