Graduate welfare

The definition of welfare: *the good fortune, health, happiness, prosperity, etc., of a person, group, or organization.* I'm sure you would agree, this is pretty much what we do in the early careers space.

Sometimes the very nature of a Graduate Program can put unnecessary pressure on graduates. For example, your Senior Executive welcomes your new cohort on day one and talks about the number of applications received and how awesome the grads must be to be here today? All very well-intentioned (trying to make them feel 'special'), but the pressure and expectation have now been set.

The pressure to be perfect, please others, try hard etc. can lead to a well-functioning person, but if not supported, can lead to dysfunction, underachievement and poor performance. And who provides this support? While leaders play a critical role in the day-to-day support, it is usually the Program Managers who play a much more active role in providing the emotional support grads need in the early stages of their careers (i.e. looking after their welfare).

Things to consider are:

- Often their brains do not know yet how to cope with the volume of information presented to them or the competing demands for their attention (based on the assumption that most graduates and interns coming into the workplace are between the ages of 20 – 28 years).
- They are still developing the mental skills (at varying levels) of self-awareness, active reflection and emotional fluency. In other words, having the ability to be in touch with who they are and being able and willing to communicate this to others.
- Growth takes time and happens with continuous learning and improvement. Acquiring a new skill, learning a new behaviour or adding a new element to their routine is where growth really happens.

The following list of strategies could work for your program:

- Foster a safe-to-fail environment. Help grads learn quickly from mistakes (as they will make at least one) and help them work towards long-term success. Build trust with them on an individual level so that they feel comfortable having honest conversations with you. Agree as a cohort that no idea or comment is 'strange', and all are welcome to contribute to conversations without fear.
- Focus on the positives and let them motivate themselves. That is, I'm not here to solve their problems or give them answers to everything. But I am here to listen, provide advice, cheer them on and advocate for them.
- Establish a clear goal (vision) and values for each cohort as they enter the business. This gives them purpose and ensures they keep each other accountable as well.
- Giving them permission to feel however they feel, but not to avoid anything because of fear. Helping them understand that if something feels uncomfortable at first, this means they are trying something different. Trying something different means they are experiencing growth.
- When something isn't working for them, tell them to take a break before getting too entrenched, to try doing something else for a while and then come back to it.

- Allow time for them to get to know themselves and what makes them happy. Rather than trying to please others, understanding that satisfaction within them is more rewarding and enjoyable. Trying to please others will just build anxiety.
- Remind them that perfection does not exist. Enjoy the experience of discovering what you can really achieve when you do your best for yourself.
- To help reduce first-day stress, make them feel at ease by providing detailed information and communicating regularly in the lead-up. Find a way to put them in touch with their cohort or their buddies so they have already connected with someone before they start on day one.
- Ensure leaders have a clear plan for the work the graduates will do for the first three months (at least). This helps graduates feel valued and that they are contributing while they are learning.
- Help grads to focus on the process rather than the outcome. Redirecting focus away from 'achievements' and instead on what they learn along the way. Taking opportunities to check in with them regularly and asking something simple like 'what have you learnt this week that you didn't know before?'. Get them in the practice of regular learning reflection, eventually, you won't need to ask the question anymore.

It is also critical to think about the welfare of your candidates when they apply to your organisation. For example, they usually face a high level of uncertainty, lack of experience, anxiety about securing a role and the competition in the market. Think about how you want them to feel at the end of the recruitment process. Do you want them to feel positively about your organisation regardless of the outcome? Things you should consider include; processes you ask them to complete, will anyone require adjustments to these processes, timeframes you allow for completion, how many steps you put them through, how you communicate and how often, are your hiring leaders prepared and on the same page, how quickly you can get verbal/formal offers out?

Candidates just want an easy to understand process, clear timeframes and regular and helpful/informative communication. They are happy to participate in the process if they understand why they are doing it and how you will use any information they provide. They also don't respond well to impersonal email template communications. If you haven't communicated with your candidates for a fortnight, then you need to make contact (regardless of whether you have an update or not).

As a Program Manager, you look after many aspects of the employee lifecycle (e.g. attraction, recruitment, onboarding, learning etc.) but none of this would be successful without setting them up for success through the support, guidance and information you provide.

It is this work that is usually not measured or reported on. This is usually the 'un-seen' work that you do that is usually appreciated by the grads, but not necessarily acknowledged or prioritised by the business.

Caring about your graduates (and candidates) is what will give you the biggest reward.