

Promoting Employee Wellness

– Making it a Reality

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The idea that a happier, healthier workforce is a more productive and more engaged workforce, with fewer problems and tensions, is not a new one. But it is one that is receiving a lot of attention these days, as terms like 'workplace wellbeing', 'corporate wellness' and 'employee wellness' get used more and more. The big question, though, is whether all this talk and attention are producing positive results or just more verbiage. So, we need to be clear about what is likely to make a difference.

The potential for employee wellness initiatives to make a positive difference is of sufficient proportions to make it very wise for leaders to consider the situation very carefully. In this article, important issues are explored with a view to establishing a degree of clarity that goes beyond superficial fads that can be quite misleading.

First, we look at why this is a topic that should be of concern to leaders.

Why focus on wellness?

Let's turn this question on its head and ask what price are we likely to pay for having employees who are well below par in terms of productivity, with limited engagement, above average sick leave and constant thoughts about moving on. Once we do that, the answer to the original question becomes clear. Add to this that disgruntled employees are more likely to present other problems due to increased levels of tension, disaffection and even alienation, and it becomes very apparent that this is an area of concern that merits close and judicious consideration. As Cheese (2021) comments:

Individual and collective wellbeing is absolutely central to a healthy society and should be seen, and measured, as one of the most important outcomes of good work and responsible business. (p. 12)

Why now?

Peter Cheese, the CEO of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), has recently published a book about how the world of work is changing (Cheese, 2021). He describes the various changes in the workplace that have been evolving for some time, capped by the recent

pandemic-driven focus on remote or hybrid working and labels these as a 'new industrial revolution' – the changes are that significant. This means that committed leaders need to look very carefully at the significance of this turmoil in people's working lives.

The workplace, for a variety of reasons, has become a highly pressurised place for a significant number of people. Sadly, we have been seeing many people, not necessarily through any fault of their own, finding it too pressurised, with the result being highly destructive, health-affecting levels of stress. And this is destructive not only for the individuals concerned, but also for the organisation and its various stakeholders.

The culmination of a combination of pressures from these changes and the intrinsic pressures of working life is producing a perfect storm in which very many people are at risk of serious harm to their mental and physical health. It is therefore essential that we do not see the interest in employee wellness as a passing fad. The stakes are far too high for that.

Good work

A further contributory factor to the current intense interest in workplace issues was the 2017 Taylor report on 'good work'. This was a government-commissioned review of what makes for 'quality work'. It was no doubt in large part a response to a recognition that working life had become highly pressurised in many ways.

The report highlighted the importance of fair levels of remuneration but pointed out that pay is certainly not the only factor that drives job satisfaction (and, by extension, productivity and engagement). Taylor and his colleagues identified a number of other key factors, such as:

- **Stability** The 'gig economy', zero-hours contracts and, more recently, pandemic-related changes in working practices have all contributed to significant instability and, with that, insecurity. While it may suit the powers that be to promote the stereotype of young people who are happy to work 'the modern way', the reality is far more complex than that.
- **Having a meaningful say** Being consulted on important issues engenders a sense of belonging and thus engagement. However, such consultation needs to be meaningful, otherwise it comes across as tokenistic and thereby breeds resentment, alienation and therefore disengagement.
- **Recognition and reward** This has been a recurring issue on training courses I have run – constant raising of concerns about not feeling valued. A recent research project I have been involved in also highlighted this theme. It would

seem that many managers find 'well done' and 'thank you' hard words to say. This is very significant, as such positives will boost morale, while their absence is likely to undermine it.

- **Skills and scope to develop** Stagnation is, of course, not a solid foundation for productivity and engagement and is likely to have an adverse effect on health and wellbeing. The idea that personal and professional development are not optional extras is a well-established one, but levels of satisfaction in this regard vary considerably in my experience.
- **Trust** Employees who feel that they cannot trust their employers to treat them fairly are unlikely to be fully committed. Consequently, the 'culture of blame' that is so often talked about is highly corrosive of trust and therefore an obstacle to health and wellbeing.

This notion of 'good work' has proven influential. For example, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) has recently set up the *Good Work Guild*, a think tank comprising a range of interested parties, with a view to influencing policy and practice across all work sectors. No doubt, the relationship between employee wellness and good work outcomes will be an important part of the Guild's deliberations.

Where do we go from here?

The popularity of concepts like 'workplace wellbeing' has led to a burgeoning industry offering all sorts of 'solutions', some quite valid and valuable, others perhaps more problematic than promising or productive. Bandwagons commonly give rise to this broad mix of legitimate offerings and dodgy deals. It is therefore essential to make sure that any investments in wellness-related support services or products are given due diligence to avoid scarce resources being wasted.

For example, it is possible to sign up to wellness platforms that employees can be given access to in order to make use of various health and wellbeing resources. These range from, at the lower end of the price spectrum, what is largely just information to highly sophisticated platforms that include expert guidance, structured programmes and a much fuller level of support on a 'whole person' basis – that is, a holistic perspective that addresses wellbeing issues as well as health. By wellbeing what I mean is the range of things that affect our quality of life. This includes health, but goes well beyond it, to include, for example, feelings of safety, security and belonging. This whole-person approach can be crucial, as even employees who are in excellent health can be disengaged and largely unproductive if the quality of their

working life is actually quite poor. This could be for a variety of reasons or any combination of them, such as the following:

- **Stress** The Health and Safety Executive define stress in terms of situations in which our ability to cope is exceeded by the level of pressure we are under. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, stress is not 'good for you'. Levels of pressure may be high, very high even, without causing stress, provided that they are within manageable limits. Once they cross that line and are no longer manageable, the stress caused is likely to have an adverse effect on health and wellbeing and can easily lead to a vicious circle – the more stressed people are, the more they struggle to cope; the more they struggle to cope, the more stressed they become (Thompson, 2019a). The consequences in terms of health and wellbeing can be devastating.
- **Bullying and harassment** These toxic behaviours can be both the cause and the result of stress. A culture that allows bullying or harassment to persist is not a culture of wellbeing. Indeed, it is likely to serve as a major obstacle to progress being made in relation to health and wellbeing.
- **Discrimination** 'Diversity and inclusion' is a widely used term these days, but anyone who believes that discrimination is a thing of the past or is even being significantly reduced does not exactly have their finger on the pulse when it comes to what is happening in the lives of minority groups. Being discriminated against is not simply an inconvenience, of course, Powerful forces like racism and sexism can have profoundly detrimental effects on people's lives – for example in relation to mental health (Thompson, 2019b).
- **Aggression and violence** The risk of harm varies depending on the nature of the organisation and the activities involved, but no workplace is entirely free of the risk of aggression and/or violence. Where such incidents occur it is essential that they are handled sensitively and supportively if people are not to be severely traumatised by the experience.
- **Loss, grief and trauma** Grief is part of life. Despite the immense pain, fear and exhaustion involved, grief is actually a positive thing - a process of healing. However, unresolved grief or grief that is badly handled (by employing organisations, for example) can prove to be immensely problematic, sometimes with catastrophic consequences, such as a mental breakdown and/or suicide (Thompson, 2009).

Clearly, then, there are major obstacles to a genuine culture of wellbeing that are not exactly uncommon in today's highly pressurised workplaces. Organisations that are seeking to promote employee wellness without

paying serious attention to such challenges risk allowing complacency to thwart their best efforts.

The term 'wellness' can be interpreted narrowly as a synonym for health or more broadly as a shorthand for health and wellbeing. While focusing on health is clearly important, failing to include wider wellbeing concerns can be understood as a significant mistake. We shall return to this point later.

But, whatever resources are put in place, they are likely to be of little value or effectiveness unless they are part of a wider strategy of wellness support. Without this, efforts are likely to be seen as tokenistic. This is where leadership starts to enter the picture.

The role of leadership

Just as efforts that are not part of a wider strategy are likely to prove futile, a strategy that is not genuinely embedded in the organisation's culture is likely to have minimal positive impact.

This is, of course, precisely why leadership needs to feature strongly in our deliberations, given that shaping and sustaining a positive, helpful culture is a core element of effective leadership (Thompson, 2016).

Cultures are, of course, very powerful in shaping behaviour, attitudes and emotional responses. Cultures give strong, powerful 'messages'. For example, some cultures make members feel welcome and valued, while others will contain an 'us-them' element that makes some people feel they don't belong or that their presence is tolerated, rather than welcomed.

So, what can be done to make a difference in terms of culture? One theme that has become very apparent over the years in my work with a wide range of organisations is that traditional 'command and control' approaches to employee relations have a tendency to create unnecessary tensions which, in turn, will often be key factors in the development of the sort of obstacles to wellbeing highlighted here.

Such approaches are largely based on fear (of adverse consequences) and, as such, tend to undermine trust and encourage defensiveness and a risk-averse approach that stifles the creativity needed to cope with major workload pressures. Leadership efforts, however noble in other regards, are unlikely to be effective if they are not based on trust.

A mantra I have emphasised on every course I have ever run on leadership has been that leaders need to earn trust, respect and credibility. In the

absence of these factors, effective leadership is likely to be, at best, an uphill struggle but – more likely – beyond reach.

An important step forward in shaping a more positive and effective culture is to focus on employee empowerment (Bloom, 2021; Huq, 2015). This reflects the need for trust to be bidirectional – that is, if employees are to flourish and produce the best results, they need to be able to trust their managers, but they must also be trusted by their managers – for example, given some degree of leeway in terms of decision making. Such relative autonomy will be an important motivating factor that helps employees to have a sense of control and to feel that their work is more meaningful. Of course, there need to be checks and balances in place, but that is a far cry from the tendency towards micro management evident in many organisations.

A key part of this is flexibility and that too needs to work in both directions. Within a genuine culture of wellbeing, empowered employees are likely to be far more willing to be flexible where needed and to 'go the extra mile'. And, for there to be a genuine culture of wellbeing, employees need to be given as much flexibility as reasonably possible. As Cooper explains:

Working more flexibly is not only doable, but also meets working people's needs for greater autonomy and control over their job and life more generally. Prior to the pandemic the global research evidence was that if you could and wanted flexible working, it delivered enhanced job satisfaction, lower stress-related sickness absence and greater productivity. It is now a reality that flexibility will survive the period of the pandemic, and, as research has been showing, should deliver to the bottom line as well as to the financial and mental wellbeing of working people. [Norgate and Cooper, 2020] (p. xi)

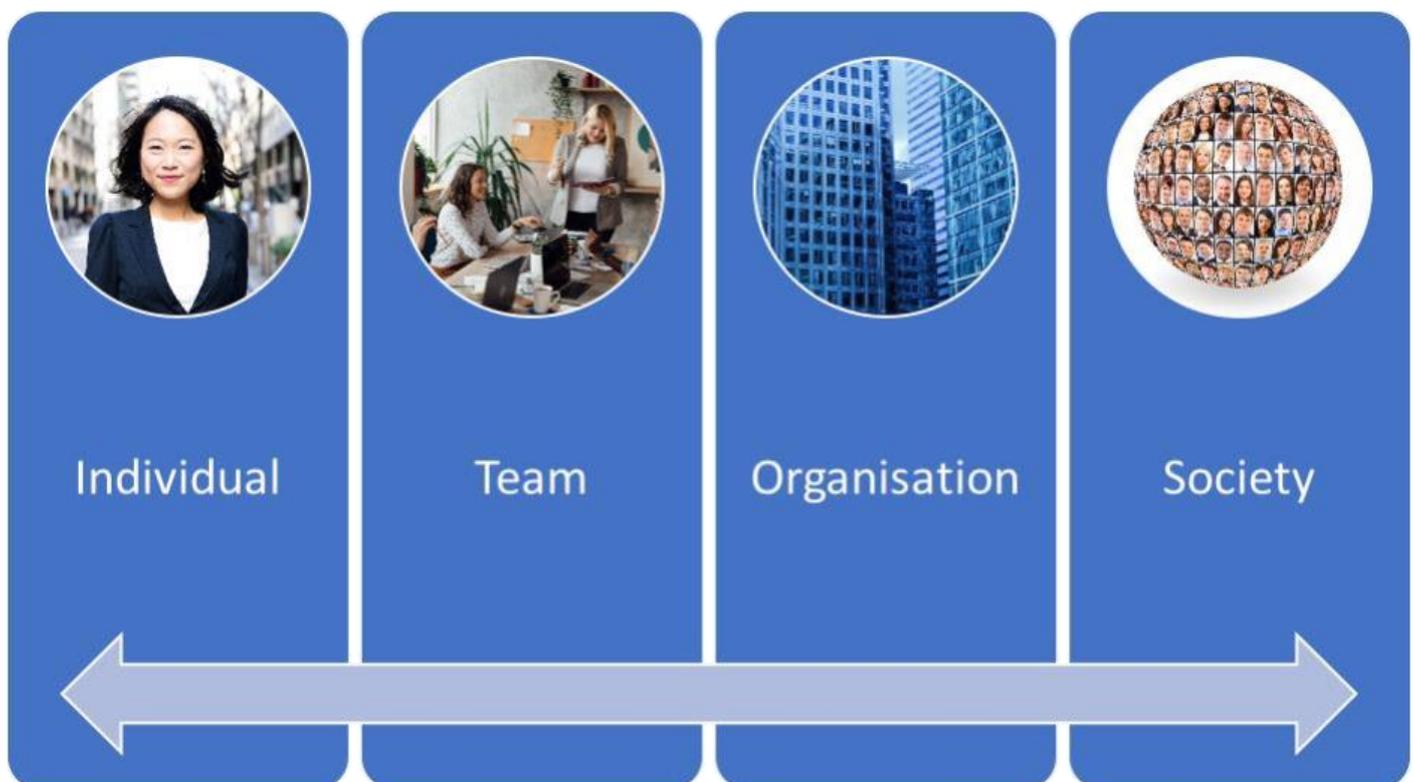
What is also important in terms of empowerment as the basis of culture change is the adoption of a holistic approach, by which I mean one that addresses the whole person and their concerns, not just their health and fitness levels. It encompasses the wider wellbeing issues outlined above and any other factors that can affect mental health and emotional wellbeing. It is also helpful if responses to such concerns are holistic and broad in their scope. For example, it is common for employee assistance programmes (EAPs) to restrict the support they offer largely to counselling. Counselling can be very useful in the right circumstances, but what is often needed is other forms of intervention, such as advocacy or practical support. In the United States, many large employing organisations and some trade unions employ social workers so that the range of interventions on offer is far wider than counselling – what is generally referred to as 'occupational social work'.

In my training and consultancy work, I have developed a tool that has proved useful in developing such a holistic approach, namely the 'wellbeing continuum'.

The wellbeing continuum

I developed this framework to help senior leadership teams to move away from the traditional focus on individual factors and the distorted picture such a narrow perspective tends to create. There is a huge health and wellbeing industry that concerns itself largely with psychological matters and has little to say about wider sociological factors. If we are to have an adequate understanding of employee wellness, then we need to include individual factors, but also locate them in their wider context.

The diagram below represents a continuum from micro at the left to macro on the right. As we move from left to right, we need to understand that each is embedded within the wider context of the next one. That is, the individual needs to be understood in the context of their team; teams need to be understood in the context of the wider organisation; and organisations need to be understood in the context of society and social change.



Team dynamics can make a huge difference – positively or negatively – on health and wellbeing. Where teams are supportive and nurturing, the impact can be tremendously beneficial. But, where there are unresolved tensions, undue competitiveness or any other factor that stands in the way of

effective teamwork, the impact can be extremely destructive in terms of morale and thus health and wellbeing.

How teams operate will be part of the wider picture of how the organisation operates, its culture, the quality of its leadership and so on. In addition, organisations will be influenced by developments in wider society. Consider, for example, the various ways in which the world of work has been changing in recent years, as discussed above. How the organisation responds to such changes will affect how teams function and how teams function will affect the direct experiences of individual employees, with consequences – again, positive or negative – for their health and wellbeing.

This framework can therefore be a useful way of assessing and addressing employee wellness needs. It can help to avoid simplistic and superficial approaches to employee wellness that run the risk of alienating staff more than empowering and engaging them.

Conclusion

The subtitle of Peter Gilbert's acclaimed book on leadership (Gilbert, 2005) is one I have always found enlightening: 'Being effective and remaining human'. For me it captures so well what leadership is all about. Being effective means getting the job done, moving forward to achieve the organisational vision, while remaining human means taking seriously the notion that an organisation's most important resource really is its human resource, its people. Neglecting the latter will serve as a significant obstacle to the former.

To support people in fulfilling their potential and achieving optimal results, leaders need to consider employee wellness very carefully and take whatever reasonable steps they can to ensure that they are developing and sustaining a genuine culture of wellbeing – a far cry from the tokenistic, tick-box compliance approaches that are popular in some places.

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