



Leading the way to wellbeing

Even when organisational strategies and policies are designed to support wellbeing, the work environment and leadership practices can act as a hindrance. Anouk Kelling examines the role that leaders play in increasing organisational wellbeing.

Any initiatives to successfully improve organisational wellbeing require the full engagement and participation of employees, in addition to a culture that supports wellbeing. Leaders play an essential role in ensuring that both occur.

In relation to employees, their engagement and participation in one-off initiatives is not enough. Success in increasing organisational wellbeing ultimately requires enduring individual behaviour change—which is achieved through repeatedly practising new behaviours. Leaders can have a powerful influence on this by ensuring individual employees consistently act to

improve their physical and mental health.

There is growing evidence that individual behavioural change is most likely to be successful when the organisational context facilitates and supports individual efforts to change. The work environment and leadership practices can help or hinder these efforts; even when organisational strategies and policies are designed to be supportive.

How can leaders best support employees to maintain behaviours that support wellbeing?

1. Leaders act as powerful role models and influencers. To achieve optimal organisational wellbeing, it is imperative that

leaders demonstrate a consistently high level of wellbeing personally. Employees notice leaders looking after their physical health, taking regular recovery breaks at work, maintaining some balance between their work role and other areas of their life, and participating in activities that provide enjoyment and meaning.

2. By ensuring the work environment actively supports and fosters wellbeing. Actively means daily, consistently and without conflicting messages. How might they do this?

- By ensuring the physical working environment is in tune with the desired wellbeing behaviour. For example, to encourage employees to be more physically active, there need to be spaces where they can stand to work, as well as easy access to places where they can exercise and stretch.
- By focusing energy and attention on establishing new behaviours and habits that support wellbeing (rather than trying to change old ones that don't work). Leaders can set up both structures and rewards for the desired behaviours. This is the thinking behind agreeing time limits on sending emails and why some organisations have set up IT systems to block email access at certain times. *If you can't establish a new behaviour, we'll do it for you!*
- By encouraging repetition. Leaders can identify which environmental prompts and leadership 'nudges' will help people to practise the desired wellbeing behaviours, and to practise them often. Noticing, rewarding and celebrating both extraordinary effort and small successes are examples where frequent repetition is helpful. Reminders and prompts to practise are also powerful. Leaders can seek feedback from their people about which specific prompts are most useful and effective. Electronic? In team meetings? A variety?
- Leaders sharing successes and innovations across business units, and sharing effective strategies with other organisations is also helpful.
- Embedding organisational vision in policy and practice is powerful. Including wellbeing measures in performance reviews demonstrates that the leadership takes wellbeing seriously.

3. Encouraging experimentation. Leaders using an experimental approach is useful for effectively shifting both wellbeing behaviour and culture. Experimentation includes collecting data on wellbeing and performance metrics, experimenting with different strategies and initiatives, reviewing these, adopting them if they are successful, experimenting again if they are not. It's a process of continual revision and improvement which leaders can drive and encourage.

In essence, leaders are ensuring that wellbeing habits become part of business as usual—"this is how we do things round here".

In addition to the strategies outlined above, which particular leadership behaviours enhance the efficacy of wellness and resilience programmes?

DEMONSTRATING AND FACILITATING TRUST

Trust of leaders has many benefits, including facilitating delegating and collaboration between employees and teams. The psychological comfort of trust frees up cognitive resources for complex problem-solving and innovation. When it comes to wellbeing, trust in leadership supports employees to implement self-care behaviours without fear of recrimination.

John Stephens and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University found the relationship between a particular style of communication—emotional carrying capacity (ECC)—supported higher levels of team trust and resilience. Emotional carrying capacity is defined by:

- **Frequent emotional expression:** the idea here is to express emotion frequently, not necessarily intensely. Regular pieces of small feedback, rather than one big communication are best.
- **Positive and negative emotional expression:** any expression of emotion needs to include both positive and negative emotion, both verbally and non-verbally.
- **Constructive:** emotion is communicated in a useful manner, without blaming, judgement or assumptions.

Rachel Clapp-Smith is associate professor of leadership at Purdue University. Her research has demonstrated that authentic leadership predicted employee trust in management. Researchers are continuing to refine the exact behaviours of 'authentic leadership', but common themes are:

- "To thy own self be true"—authentic leaders are high in emotional intelligence, they know and are responsive to their own thoughts, feelings, values and strengths;
- An awareness of how they are perceived by others;
- An ability to read and understand context as well as others strengths, values and drivers;
- The use of these and other psychological resources (for example, optimism, hope and resilience) to foster positive self-development;
- Striving for a particular conviction rather than a personal benefit such as status, honour or financial gain;
- Embracing and acting as an original—not a carbon copy.

DEMONSTRATING AND FACILITATING POSITIVE EMOTION

A strong body of research data has demonstrated that experiencing more positive emotion is linked with both improved individual and team performance as well as enhanced well-being. The mechanism for how this works is both neurochemical and physiological. Experiencing positive emotions like joy, hope, achievement, satisfaction and gratitude signal to our bodies and brains that a stress state is not required, and takes us instead into a calm, optimum zone. Research by Professor Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina has shown that experiencing more positive emo-

tion broadens the scope of attention and cognition, and therefore the behavioural options that are available to us.

Other researchers have demonstrated that leaders' positive emotions are 'contagious'—they help others around them to experience more positive emotion also. In particular, the emotions of compassion, forgiveness and gratitude have been shown to be particularly powerful when demonstrated by leaders.


DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The power of positive relationships has been described by Jane Dutton, Robert L Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Business Administration and Psychology at the University of Michigan. She refers to them as high-quality connections (HQC):

"[It] literally lit you up. Before the interaction, you may have felt depleted, tired or simply neutral. After the interaction, even if it was brief, you had greater energy and capability for action. This sense of heightened energy is real, and it is an important indicator

that you are engaged in a high-quality connection."

Greater energy and capability for action makes it possible for employees to consistently engage in wellbeing behaviours while also maintaining their work performance.

Positive relationships also help to create an environment in which employee autonomy is supported, allowing individuals to make decisions that support their wellbeing and are intrinsically rewarding. Autonomy-supportive and intrinsically rewarding behaviours have been shown to increase goal-striving behaviour and goal attainment—exactly what is required to ensure new behaviours are practised so that new habits are developed. 

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