

Pulse check:

Owning up and Getting to the Heart of the Matter on Sustainable Wellbeing at Work

Written by Tiffany Missiha
November 2013



Wellbeing has been the talk of the past couple months through our client conversations, and it is clear that there is an increasing interest to make Wellbeing real within the workplace. Not just a nice idea or a word thrown into the soft skills bucket. But to define it, understand it, what it means to be well, and what organisations are doing to support it.

What does it really mean to be well? When our focus is on wellbeing, our aim is to enable people to thrive at work— to be using their strengths, have healthy supportive relationships, and to be engaged and proactive rather than disengaged and purely reactive.

So whose responsibility is it anyway? We have consistently noticed a trend. There's been emphasis on placing the responsibility of wellbeing primarily on the individual. If the person is unwell, it is because they don't have the personal resources to cope. So, fix them, and you fix the problem. Correction... fix yourself, and you fix the problem!

With this comes a blend of treatments to serve: gym memberships, counselling and therapy, apples on desks, stress man-

agement courses, lunch time yoga classes, and even head massages if you're lucky. And if you still feel unwell... well then, it's not our problem.

This is the simplest solution— while it is true that individuals ought to take ownership of their wellbeing, it is foolish to ignore the impact that the environment/culture plays. Especially when people spend almost 1/2 their day at work.

As an example, I have a friend who began to feel severely ill earlier this year. Eventually he was hospitalized and found out that there was a serious mold problem in the interior of his flat. No matter how many vitamins he took, runs he went on, how healthy he ate... if the mold was not fixed he would not have recovered. And there is no medicinal fix that could alleviate this. It was only until the problem within his environment was fixed that he started to recover and feel well.

So when does it become the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that the environment is fit for purpose? That the organisational culture and way of working is conducive to optimal functioning and enables people to



thrive? When is it no longer a person's inability to cope, and when does it become a systemic issue about the organisation's poor management, or leadership, or lack of support? Rather than playing the blame game, it's time that organisations stop putting plasters on wounds and own up to the systemic issues that are really impacting employee wellbeing and engagement.

How to take Ownership of Sustainable Wellbeing at Work:

1. **Listen to your people -** Empower their voices rather than provide them with a quick solution. Quick fixes like head massages might create momentary pleasures but they don't target the real issues. Listen to your people to see how your organisation's structure and systems are impacting them. Poor leadership, company culture, certain processes and procedures, and lack of recognition or development opportunities are some issues

2. *Really* listen to your people.

With the stigma around mental health, it's no wonder that people use the word 'stress' as an umbrella term. If you *really* listen to your people and provide them with the opportunity to feedback and open up, you will probably find that many are actually depressed and unhappy at work. Depression, anxiety, meaninglessness, lack of purpose, low work satisfaction, and disengagement are prevalent in the workplace. Tune into the factors within the organisation that are really contributing to this.

3. Consider the context. Ask yourself the right questions and be honest. Be curious about why so many people are taking long term sick leave. If you continue to ask the question 'why' you might find that the source of the problem is actually rooted in a context rather than the person. And saying 'like it or leave it' is an unproductive response. If this is your attitude, then you may as well prepare for a high turnover and costs.

4. Invest in the right things.

Lunch time yoga sessions are great – don't get me wrong. Yoga increases mindfulness, blood flow to the brain, and keeps you active. It also increases positive emotions which have a myriad of benefits, like prosocial behaviours and creativity. While this is a short term boost, is it a long term benefit? And does it lead to sustainable wellbeing outcomes? Consider investing time, energy and money into initiative that a) target the real cause, and b) lead to sustainable outcomes. Culture change and professional development strategies are more likely to do this.

5. Structure towards sustainability. Think long-term programmes and expect gradual shifts and changes. Remember there is no quick fix when the problem is rooted in a culture or environment. It takes time, commitment, and the right kind of sponsorship for a cultural shift to be successful.

Wellbeing has a bottom line. Estimated annual costs to UK employers of mental health difficulties (including sickness absence, reduced productivity, and turnover) is £ 25.9 billion (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2007). Additionally, 44% of UK workers report exhaustion each week, and work-related stress costs the NHS more than £7 billion annually (Dex, 2003). **There is much less 'soft' stuff in wellbeing than many might think. The bottom line is clear: take care of your people, and your people will take care of your business.**

Tiffany Missiha, November 2013

References:

Dex, S. (2003). *Families and work in the twenty-first century*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. (2007). *Mental Health at Work: Developing the business case* (Policy Paper no. 8). London@ SCMh.

