



The ripple effect

As a leader, your behaviour influences
employee wellbeing and organisational success

Writing **Martina Doherty**

Employee wellbeing has emerged as a topmost priority for many organisations. This is due to the influence of critical challenges such as talent attraction, talent retention and worrying mental health trends. It comprises many different elements. According to advisory firm Gallup, these elements include: career wellbeing (liking what you do); social wellbeing (having strong relationships); financial wellbeing; physical wellbeing; and community wellbeing.

Studies indicate that wellbeing in the workplace is cultivated through the environment, job satisfaction and improved employee engagement – with leader behaviour a key contributor. Addressing wellbeing as a company policy approaches employee wellbeing from the wrong angle. It gives the message that self-care is an individual issue and the responsibility of the organisation is to help individuals cope.

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Since wellbeing is directly linked with absenteeism, job performance, employee burnout and staff turnover, it's clear it is more than an individual issue, however. Leaders should seriously consider their influence on their people's wellbeing, as well as its effect on the ability of their organisation to thrive in today's challenging conditions.

Existing in a world of systems

Organisations are dynamic social structures, made up of multiple systems of interdependent parts with everyone existing within each level of the system – micro (individual), meso (team/group) and macro (the wider organisational culture and structure). Employee wellbeing permeates each of these levels since how an individual feels and functions impacts how they show up and perform in their role, in their team and as a company employee. So, too, does leader behaviour, with research increasingly

highlighting its systemic impact within the organisation, particularly on employee wellbeing.

As a result, there are more expectations on leaders than ever before and they could be forgiven for thinking they need to be superhuman and have all the answers. But that's neither realistic nor what's needed. What is actually needed is for leaders to create space and a safe, positive environment for themselves and their people to thrive.

The science of positive psychology

Enter the science of positive psychology and its related leadership discipline, positive leadership – both of which have emerged from years of social science research. The positive perspective takes a different approach to the traditional problem-solving mindset by stressing positive communication, optimism and strengths, as well as the value embedded within problems and weakness.

This is often misunderstood as positive thinking, which can appear Pollyannaish and unrealistic in a demanding work environment. But it is not about ignoring problems or difficult behaviour; it is about noticing what works and what energises – and leveraging that to create positive outcomes. A wealth of research indicates that when positive practices are given greater emphasis than negative ones, individuals and organisations tend to flourish.

Cultivating positive leadership

According to management professor Kim Cameron, one of the founders of the science of positive leadership, one of its functions is to demonstrate practices that can overcome the effects of the negative. In other words, positive leaders embrace and demonstrate a set of resources, attitudes and behaviours that allow others to achieve optimal performance. This needn't be difficult. Through conscious effort, any leader can embrace the following positive practices for the benefit of employee wellbeing and the organisation as a whole.

1 Creating a culture of psychological safety

This is where there is a shared belief that it's OK to express ideas and concerns, and take risks without negative retribution. It means allowing mistakes, listening to what people say rather than what you want to hear, and showing your own vulnerability by demonstrating you do not always have all the answers and are willing to ask for help.

2 Identifying, capitalising and building on the strengths of your people

Having everyone working to their strengths cultivates positive emotions and has been repeatedly shown to foster high performance, abundance and positive energy.

BE AWARE OF THE EMOTIONAL CONTAGION OF YOUR OWN MOODS

3 Fostering positive energy People are not emotional islands. Being aware of the emotional contagion of your own moods, and of every individual in your organisation, is key to creating a positive working environment. It also means recognising and re-enforcing positive energisers who infuse teams with their energy, while managing negative employees. This helps to strengthen interpersonal relationships, foster coordination and collaboration, and enhance the efficiency of interactions, resulting in performance advantages for individuals and the overall organisation.

4 Using supportive communication It's not difficult to communicate positively when things are going well but, when behaviour needs to be corrected, it's important it is delivered in a supportive way. This can be achieved by using descriptive communication i.e. describing issues and their consequences in objective terms and suggesting alternatives rather than using evaluative, judging language and assigning blame. In doing so, your people see what they can control and influence, allowing positive relationships to develop.

5 Enhancing the meaningfulness of work

Jessica Pryce-Jones, author of *Happiness at Work*, calculated we spend approximately 90,000 hours – or a third of our lives – at work over a lifetime. So, it makes sense that a happy, fulfilled life involves meaningful work. One way to achieve this is to emphasise a mission that is focused on goals and values beyond profit. Nevertheless, in commercially focused organisations this may raise a degree of scepticism. A more practical way to enhance meaningfulness is reframing performance evaluation and recognition to focus on 'contribution' goals over and above (or at least equal to!) 'acquisition' goals. Research by US academic Jennifer Crocker shows that when goals focus on contributing to an ecosystem rather than an 'ecosystem', a growth orientation and sense of meaning emerge and a psychological sense of wellbeing is generated¹.

Implementing positive leadership should not be difficult, but it is rare because conversations and tasks focused on addressing challenges tend to dominate the agenda, driving out positive practices. But in a global environment beset with challenges of talent acquisition, talent retention and low levels of employee engagement, positive leadership is critical if organisations are to thrive. A few well-chosen strategies, such as those above, can take any organisation from good to great, and create a positive culture of happy, healthy high-performers. ■

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¹ 'From Egosystem to Ecosystem: Implications for Relationships, Learning, and Well-being', J Crocker, American Psychological Association, 2008