Leading to wellbeing

Anna Topakas
University of Sheffield

Employee wellbeing has significant implications for workplace behaviours and performance.

Leaders play a critical role in maintaining and improving employee wellbeing.

Leaders can improve employee wellbeing by building positive relationships with their staff, supporting and promoting organisational wellbeing initiatives, designing and assigning work that is manageable and satisfying, considering the implications of their behaviours, habits and communications, and empowering followers to shape organisational leadership and culture with wellbeing at their centre.

The importance of wellbeing

Wellbeing is more than merely managing stress and anxiety. It is about thriving and finding enjoyment at work and at home. People enjoy wellbeing when they consistently experience relatively more positive emotions than negative ones over a significant period of time, and interpret these experiences as general life satisfaction or happiness.[1] Because the work-life distinction is blurred, investments in improved workplace conditions and relationships can have a positive influence on employees' overall wellbeing. Equally, supporting employees' overall wellbeing will

have positive effects on their workplace contributions.

Work-related wellbeing often manifests in high levels of job satisfaction, engagement, motivation and positive emotions, as well as improved performance.[2] It is associated directly with performance and factors that support good performance, including improved mental processing, creativity, proactive behaviours, interpersonal effectiveness, and citizenship behaviours.[3]

Leaders and line managers play a crucial role in promoting employee wellbeing as they are uniquely positioned to influence both the interpersonal and task-related aspects of work. Evidence shows that both the relationship with one's leader[4] and their leadership style[5] have significant implications for wellbeing and performance.[6]

Improving employee wellbeing

There are a number of areas where leadership can improve employee wellbeing.

Positive relationships: For employees, their relationship with their manager is the "lens through which the entire work experience is viewed".[7] It is perhaps the

[1] Wright, T. A. and R. Cropanzano (2004), 'The role of psychological well-being in job performance: A fresh look at an age-old quest'.

[2] Warr, P. and K. Nielsen (2018), 'Wellbeing and work performance'.

[3] ibid.

[4] Dulebohn, J. H. et al (2012), 'A meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of leader-member exchange: Integrating the past with an eye toward the future'; Martin, R. et al (2016), 'Leader–member exchange (LMX) and performance: A meta-analytic review'.

[5] Hoch, J. E. et al (2018), 'Do ethical, authentic, and servant leadership explain variance above and beyond transformational leadership? A meta-analysis'.

[6] Inceoglu, I. et al (2018), 'Leadership behavior and employee well-being: An integrated review and a future research agenda'.

[7] Gerstner, C. R. and D. V. Day (1997), 'Meta-Analytic review of leader–member exchange theory: Correlates and construct issues'.

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most important work-based relationship people have. By building a positive, respectful, and trusting relationship with their staff, managers can contribute directly to improving wellbeing.[8] Strong, high-quality relationships also provide the platform for early identification and resolution of threats to wellbeing, yielding a high return on the investment of time and effort in building such relationships.

Wellbeing is personal: Each employee is unique and will be affected differently by life experiences and interactions both at work and outside.[9] For managers to be able to support the wellbeing of their staff, they must get to know them as people, not merely employees. This will add meaning to the work interactions for both staff and leaders, and each interaction will have positive emotional effects. By knowing their staff, leaders can adapt the support, resources, work tasks, and workplace interactions to create a personalised configuration of work conditions that will continually boost each employee's wellbeing.

Organisation-wide initiatives: The recent surge in organisations adopting a menu of initiatives and resources designed to boost staff wellbeing shows employers are serious about supporting staff.[10] But managers cannot simply consign wellbeing to the newly repurposed meditation room.[11] For such initiatives to succeed, leaders must promote them. To send the message that

these are not just for show, managers could:

1) share their own experience of taking part in wellbeing initiatives;
2) communicate the availability of initiatives widely and repeatedly;
3) help prioritise and create opportunities for staff to engage by curbing their workload;
4) incorporate discussion of wellbeing and relevant resources as part of supervision and performance management meetings.

Everyday interactions and the way work is designed[10] can strongly impact wellbeing. Leaders should consider the implications of daily work processes, and the nature of tasks and interactions when designing and assigning work. They must assess the job not only for stressors, but for wellbeing benefits, making sure these are safeguarded.

Leaders as stressors: Managers and leaders can help or hinder an individual's wellbeing[12] through their actions, messages, symbolisms, communication, and direct interactions: the Sunday email, the push for better performance with fewer resources, even the well-intentioned festive video message from the CEO. Employees constantly receive and interpret messages from multiple leaders. These have intended and unintended consequences for staff wellbeing. Each leader has a responsibility to contribute to the collective's wellbeing by communicating responsibly and mindfully, whether to their direct reports or more widely. What is more, constructive

[8] Martin, R. et al (2010), 'Leader-Member Exchange review and future directions'.
[9] Anglim, J. et al (2020), 'Predicting psychological and subjective well-being from personality: A meta-analysis'.
[10] Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2018), 'Health and wellbeing at work - Survey report'.
[11] Day, A. and K. Nielsen (2017), 'What does our organization do to help our well-being? Creating healthy workplaces and workers'.
[12] Harms, P. D. et al (2017), 'Leadership and stress: A meta-analytic review'.

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leadership comes with gains for the leader's wellbeing as well.[13]

The power in the follower: Leadership can only happen when leaders and followers engage and align their efforts – without followers there is no leadership. Wellbeing-promoting behaviours and initiatives needn't always be initiated by leaders. Building a culture where everyone is mindful of their own and others' wellbeing means each team member can have a ripple effect through their own behaviour and positively influence their own, their team's and their leader's wellbeing. By recognising the role and influence of followers, every member of the organisation is empowered to use leadership to steer the collective in a positive direction.

By taking a holistic approach to promoting wellbeing, public sector leaders and followers can initiate a virtuous cycle between wellbeing and workplace performance, ultimately improving the quality and value of the services they deliver to the community. There is abundant evidence of the influence of leaders on employee wellbeing and performance. However, research has neglected the follower side of the leadership equation. By understanding and investing in developing followership skills and behaviours, we can maximise the benefits of the leadership processes for wellbeing and performance.

Anna Topakas is a lecturer in work psychology at the University of Sheffield, as well as a leadership development practitioner. Her research interests are in organisational leadership, followership, and mental health and wellbeing in the context of leader-follower dynamics.

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[13] Kaluza, A. J. et al (2020), 'Leadership behaviour and leader self-reported well-being: A review, integration and meta-analytic examination'.

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