

Are corporate well-being initiatives really just well-meaning initiatives?

This post reflects the view of Global Eloquence following discussions, views and results from over 4,000 individual managers at all levels in 420 engagement workshops across Europe in 2018. The aim is to outline perceptions about well-being initiatives and the challenges faced by well-meaning individuals and groups engaged in implementing programs of this nature.



The Challenge: Leadership teams are struggling to implement employee well-being initiatives due to incompatible corporate cultures.

Many well-meaning leaders struggle to implement well-being initiatives within organisations due to incompatible corporate culture.

This view is backed up by the CIPD – Health & Wellbeing at Work Survey Report – May 2018, which stated:

“The rising trends of ‘presenteeism’ (people working when unwell) and ‘leaveism’ (people using allocated time off to work) identified in our survey show how organisational cultures and work pressures are more powerful in guiding employee behaviour than Well-being initiatives”.

The report continues:

“An effective employee Well-being strategy requires a ‘whole organisation’ response with serious leadership commitment and supportive line management. Yet our findings show less than a third of senior leaders encourage a focus on mental Well-being through their actions and behaviour or that line managers are trained in supporting people with mental ill health.” CIPD

Having worked with many organisations, my experience reinforces this reality as, on an almost daily basis, people recount their working pressures, responsibilities and challenges.

Laying the blame for the lack of engagement in well-being initiatives

It would be easy to assume that Leadership is at fault for failing well-being initiatives, and management teams are under equipped to deliver these programs. However, in my experience many Leaders and managers understand the importance of employee well-being and adopt a positive attitude towards their implementation.

We have seen an increase in such initiatives within the corporate environment. It is also no secret that businesses have become increasingly aware of the cost implications of not addressing well-being, and that employee wellness should be viewed as an essential business investment.

This view is also stated Personnel Today – Occupational Health & Well-Being – April 2017.

“Prevention is cheaper than cure” and “safe and healthy workplaces generate 4% higher profit margins and 20% more revenue per employee”

A commercial perspective perhaps but also a perspective that would support business engagement and ROI.

Why then do...

“...less than a third of senior leaders encourage a focus on mental well-being through their actions and behaviour”?

Discussions regarding the promotion of well-being with leaders’ and managers’ ‘role modelling behaviours’ often result in identifying the very real challenges around time, priorities, current change agendas and other dynamics that make engagement so difficult. Leaders and Managers are ‘in’ the culture that makes their well-meaning well-being initiatives such a personal, as well as organisational, dichotomy. The large majority feels like they are trying to get a square peg in a round hole, shoehorning employee well-being into a business focused on many other pressing and real priorities.

It is clear that the attitude and behaviours of, not just senior leaders and managers, but also employee, is needed to be congruent with promoting positive mental and physical well-being and discouraging unhealthy behaviours. It is also clear, and well evidenced, that a high majority of people will conform to culture, surroundings, environment, rules and norms in order to ‘fit in’, be ‘accepted’ and be part of ‘the group’.

Perhaps then, Alan Kohll is correct when he speaks of the importance of culture and not just Leadership and Management, when he says...

“The fundamental building blocks of creating a healthy workplace – crucially effective leadership, people management practices and culture”. Forbes – Aug 2018



Where does culture fit into the engagement in well-being?:

I would suggest that a corporate culture in which we can all thrive is rarely evident. What appears to be more common are well-meaning employee well-being initiatives often launched into an incompatible culture, at worst, and an unsupportive culture at best.

Again, as stated...

“Organisational cultures and work pressures are more powerful in guiding employee behaviour than well-being initiatives”.

Across the many discussions and workshops in which I am involved, the general view is that businesses are addressing the effects of employee wellness with well-being initiatives, but not the cause. Metaphorically, they may be simply rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

Statistic suggest that current approaches are not generally working. In a striking example of this, a study by Green Path Financial Wellness reported that 71% employees cited personal finances as a top source of stress. For many, the reality or at least perception is that there is just no time for well-being. Our working cultures are preventing our well-meaning approaches to well-being. And, unless we change how we are addressing well-being, we will struggle to have our well-meaning impact.

As stated in the CIPD – Health & Wellbeing at Work Survey Report – May 2018:

“...it’s hard to see how organisations will achieve the step change needed to improve people’s Well-being at work.”

In fact the report is far harder on businesses saying...

“In too many organisations, employee well-being appears to be low on the agenda. For example, only around half report that employee well-being is on senior leaders’ agendas and that line managers are bought in to the importance of well-being. Given that good leadership and people management practices form the foundations of building a healthy workplace, every employer needs to focus their attention on these areas if they want to make a long-term and sustainable difference to people’s well-being. Organisations are still more likely to take a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to well-being and to act flexibly on an ad hoc basis, according to employee need, than have a formal strategy or plan. Further, nearly three in ten of those who include stress among their top three causes of absence are not taking any steps to identify or reduce it”.

A consultant’s perspective

I have yet to engage with any leader or manager that does not understand the benefits of wellness within their teams and organisation. Equally true is that I have not worked with a group or individual that has not raised their struggles with work-life balance or well-being.

Leaders, managers and employees often feel trapped within the ‘norms’ of their busy culture. We are all in the ‘Rat Race’ and the race has got faster and faster. How fast can we run and for how long?

I constantly hear how “we are under resourced”, “can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel” and that “we are just overwhelmed”. This is a fairly typical reflection of culture or at least a common perception. In my view, rather ironically, this is not an ideal situation for employers or employees for the many reasons stated above and indeed for the many reasons not addressed in this short post. Leaders, managers and many of those with well-meaning intentions are really struggling to engage ‘the business’ in well-being.

There is no quick fix as each organisation’s and individual’s situation is complex and different. That said, a focus on ‘the culture’ and shaping of the culture to accept and enable well-being will help to go beyond well-meaning within organisations.

Below are ten cultural aspects for consideration when equipping those engaging in well-being initiatives within organisations.



The top ten considerations for moving from well-meaning to Well-being

1. Cultural change is critical to the success of well-being agendas in the workplace. The focus must be on the culture and not just well-being initiatives, or they will only be well-meaning initiatives.
2. A year on year rise of presenteeism (coming in to work when unwell) and leaveism (using organised leave/holidays/sick days to work from home) is evidence of workplace pressure. Address this specifically as you approach your cultural shift.
3. Supporting well-being can be complex and specialised. Initiatives must connect all aspects of wellness – looking at individual access to all related physical, mental, emotional or financial support through appropriate and trained recourses.
4. Budget: If decisions are primarily influenced by budgetary constraints, organisations are more likely to report that their well-being activity is seen and experienced as merely well-meaning.
5. Committing time not just budget. Commitment of time in well-being will produce results. Not committing time or budget alone will result in a well-meaning but unrewarding practice.
6. Well-being needs a proactive rather than reactive approach. Businesses tend to deal with mental well-being in an ad hoc way – dealing with situations as they escalate and then providing the help needed. A more proactive approach could prevent issues becoming unmanageable and leading to long-term absence.

7. Proactive companies that invest in workplace health see both physical and psychological positive effects.
8. Commitment of leaders and managers. This is key to wellness throughout the workforce. Managers must be present, approachable and lead by example.
9. Those supporting well-being need to be equipped with the confidence, competence and sensitivity to deal with the well-being of others. Sufficient training and support is needed for them to carry out this vital role.
10. Always seek an external and objective perspective on your organisational culture and working norms.

