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# Achieving high performance through wellness at work

## Wellness programmes are an ideal vehicle for lifting performance at work as long as you have the focus right.

How do we get the best out of our people? It's a question asked in organisations around the globe. The answers come in many forms of course, from building empowering leaders, to making sure the right biscuits are in the lunchroom. An increasing number of organisations are also recognising staff wellness as being central to driving performance at work. Given the bank of research findings flowing through constantly from neuroscience about human performance, it is easy to see how helping people achieve wellness in both body and mind enables them to perform better. Key to making this work in organisations is ensuring people are getting the right tools, information and methods for doing this.

### Well-being and performance

The World Health Organisation has one of the more useful working definitions of well-being. It states that wellness or health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". They also define mental wellness as "a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community". Here we can begin to understand the connection between wellness and personal performance.

Wellness at work extends far beyond simply encouraging people to walk their 10,000 steps in the day. The reality is that we bring our whole self to work – mind, body, heart and soul. Gone are the days where we can afford to ignore this point. Historically organisations have seen the more 'personal' aspects of employees as, well, none of their business. This is old thinking. After all, we are human beings even when we are at work. Where well-being at work reaches its zenith is when individuals are not only physically healthy, but also able to confidently and expertly manage their mental and emotional state. It is this quality of self leadership that helps us to perform at our very best.

Science is providing an increasing amount of hard data to explain how our emotional well-being influences performance. Harvard researcher and lecturer, Shaun Achor explains, "your brain at 'positive' is 31 percent more productive than your brain at 'negative', 'neutral' or 'stressed' ... your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, your energy levels rise". It doesn't stop at individual performance. Achor goes on to say, "in fact, what we found is that every single business outcome improves". In a review of numerous Gallup studies it is evident that employees who report experiencing more

positive feelings than negative feelings at work receive higher performance ratings from their supervisors. When we feel good we think better.

### Wellness really does pay dividends

An increasing body of research shows the connection between employee wellness, engagement and the bottom line. When people feel in control of their wellness and performance they are happier and more engaged, thus encouraging discretionary effort; the holy grail of any organisation and the key to improved productivity, efficiency and bottom line results.

In a landmark study of well-being in the workplace, Gallup researchers report that: "changing an organisation's culture to help employees better manage and improve their well-being over time can result in substantial financial returns for the organisation." Conversely, we know the impact on the business when people are stressed or lacking energy and focus. They explain "... employees with low engagement and low well-being will quickly drag the group's performance down."

### What do you include in a wellness programme?

Based on the typical challenges people have around performance at work, and taking into account all aspects of self, here are some of the key areas to include in any wellness programme:

- A working definition of personal performance and wellness
- What is stress, its effects and the myths about stress (there are many!)
- Strategies for developing self awareness
- Practical and reliable tools for managing our emotional state – including things to do whilst with others such as in a meeting or on the phone
- Strategies for switching off from work
- Skills for managing priorities and coping with multiple demands
- Quality information and advice on:
  - Nutrition
  - Hydration
  - Sleep
  - Exercise
  - Natural light
  - Breathing.

Traditionally, stress management training seems to have focused more on informing people of the dangers of stress and what they should do to mitigate it, with less focus on practical strategies and explanations as to why certain strategies work. For example, almost

everyone has heard that it's a good idea to avoid coffee after 3pm. However, people rarely learn why they feel a dip in energy around that time (it's rarely due to a big lunch according to researchers) and what they can do instead of having a coffee to get through the rest of the day productively. A protein snack such as a handful of nuts can do wonders at that time to balance our blood sugar levels and keep us going. Alternatively, a nap is the answer according to John Medina in *Brain Rules* (yes, the Spanish have the right idea entirely!).

### Is your hand on the steering wheel? Enabling sustained change

The aim needs to be to educate rather than simply inform. Whether someone is easily stressed at work, stuck with unhealthy sleep patterns, or struggling to wind down in the evenings, we need to be answering their questions. What strategies and tools can I implement? Why do they work well? How do I actually apply them?

Many a frustrated leader has said, "Well, they're just going to have to get on with it like the rest of us", and the reality is that they would if they could! If it was as simple as 'pulling yourself up by your bootstraps' we'd all be doing amazingly well. Our Kiwi pioneering spirit of 'getting on with it' will take us so far, but beyond that people benefit from quality self management tools in order to truly grow and excel. When people learn to run their brain and body more effectively, they often liken it to getting their hands back on the steering wheel of their life. Sustained change is born out of giving people the right tools to do this for themselves.

### Establishing or fine-tuning a wellness programme

Five things to consider when establishing a wellness programme:

1. Take the pulse of your organisation and test readiness for implementing a wellness programme:
  - What is the current culture around wellness and performance? Is there low tolerance for stress, or is it a fully accepted part of the job? Are people encouraged (explicitly or implicitly) to finish on time, or is working long hours rewarded? What constitutes high performance?
  - Ensure senior leadership will champion the programme. Will they be role models? We all know the value of having senior leaders on board, making it much easier to achieve buy-in through the organisation.
2. Leaders will want a business case. Use the prolific research available to educate key stakeholders in the range of benefits of the programme to the business.
3. Look for where you can add wellness and personal performance skills to your existing programmes. Also identify where specific teams would benefit from a tailored wellness programme. Often senior leadership teams can be a good place to start.
4. Provide both group and individual activities in the programme. Combine regular workshops with one-to-one coaching where needed. This means people receive the tools and background information they need, as well as the personal and tailored support they might require. This helps people truly integrate tools, change unproductive habits and create new ways of working. Enhancing wellness and performance is not only an individual matter. Ideally it happens across the team or organisation by creating a culture of high performance. Bringing people together to learn gives them a language with which to talk about their wellness and their personal performance, helping it become part of 'how we do things around here'.
5. Consider what resources you will provide people with that will help them embed tools and instil new patterns. Helpful tools include: mini booklets and cards for desktop and handbag, audio tracks, short video-clip reminders of key tools, regular email reminders and intranet messages.

At the heart of genuine high performance at work is enabling

staff and leaders to get their hands back on the steering wheel, confidently improving and maintaining their own personal sense of well-being, in order to drive their own results. It's about helping people develop the right skills and the right mind-set that in turn helps the business thrive. ■

References available on request



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