

Good Bosses Create More Wellness than Wellness Plans Do

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In the name of employee wellness, and in response to insurance company demands, corporations are offering well-being initiatives with financial incentives. Complete this cholesterol screening, say, and you'll get \$100 added to your paycheck; participate in some number of wellness programs, and you'll receive another bonus. In this quest to increase employee wellness, however, organizations are often unwittingly making things worse. Is it

any surprise that [initial studies](#) on wellness programs are showing they don't lead to any visible results?

At best, these initiatives are nothing more than lip service or PR. But at worst, they actually cause more stress. Having to jump through hoops, do cholesterol blood tests, and fill out well-being questionnaires is just one way that these programs can add yet more to-dos to an already full schedule. As one employee shared with me, "I feel like my workplace wants me to take care of my wellness yet pressures me with such tight deadlines that I barely have time to eat lunch at my desk. I know it would be good for me to attend, but I also feel anxious when my manager and colleagues frown at me leaving my desk to go stretch. What's more, at the end of the day I feel guilty because I didn't take care of my well-being and attend the yoga class." Well-being becomes not a needed break from the pressures of work but just one more job requirement.

When you look at the data, employers seem to be missing the point. It is not by obligating employees to participate in these kinds of classes or screenings that well-being will improve, nor is it by providing material perks; a revealing [study](#) showed that employees actually prefer a happier workplace to a fatter paycheck anyway.

So what leads to employee happiness? A workplace characterized by humanity. An organizational culture characterized by forgiveness, kindness, trust, respect, and inspiration. Hundreds of studies conducted by pioneers of positive organizational psychology, including Jane Dutton and Kim Cameron at the University of Pennsylvania and Adam Grant at Wharton, demonstrate that a culture characterized by a positive work culture leads to improved employee loyalty, engagement, performance, creativity, and productivity. Given that about three-quarters of the U.S. workforce is disengaged at work — and the high cost of employee turnover — it's about time organizations start paying attention to the data.

Research suggests that the most powerful way leaders can improve employee well-being is not through programs and initiatives but through day-to-day actions. For example, data from a large study run by [Anna Nyberg at the Karolinska Institute](#) shows that having a harsh boss is linked to heart problems in employees. On the other side of the coin, research demonstrates that leaders who are inspiring, empathic, and supportive have more loyal and engaged employees. So checking in with employees about their families once in a while may help more than offering a mindfulness class at lunchtime.

Leaders set the tone for their organization, and their behavior determines whether interactions in their organization are characterized by trust, forgiveness, understanding, empathy, generosity, and respect. For example, one Fortune 500 corporation in the Bay Area has a system in place whereby the CEO is immediately informed if an employee comes down with a major illness or has experienced a personal tragedy. Within 15 minutes, no matter how busy he is, the CEO makes time to call that person and offer his support.

We have forgotten that organizations are first and foremost places of human *interaction*, not just *transaction*. Research shows that our greatest need after food and shelter is social connection — positive social relationships with others. If we create work environments characterized by these kinds of positive and supportive interactions, we create organizations that thrive. Organizations with very low turnover. Organizations that inspire. And organizations that enjoy superior results for employees and employers alike.

This is not to say that leaders and managers should be too “soft,” nor does this mean that an organization becomes a place that is too “nice.” You can still lead powerfully, you can still exert authority, you can still influence, and you can still communicate frankly while remaining courteous, empathic, and understanding. Rather than adding more and more wellness initiatives and material perks, employers can actually do something much simpler — not to mention cost-effective — that will have much greater results. By creating a values-based culture characterized by humanity, they can create an organization with true workplace well-being.



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