

# Why is positive mental health not a priority within organisations?

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Through his positive mental health advocacy work, Geoff McDonald has seen a significant increase in workplace interest in the topic. However, he is warning that there is a lot of work still to be done. He highlights mental health and general health should be a strategic priority for organisations. He acknowledges that companies are increasingly engaged in wellbeing activities (wellbeing weeks, mental health awareness weeks), but he feels that it still appears ad hoc and a 'tick box' exercise, rather than part of a deeper long-term strategic priority.

If we accept that the most important driver of individual, team and organisation performance is the "energy" of people; or the human capacity that individuals have to perform at their best; or their passion to get things done, it has been remarkable to note that most organisations and work places that I encounter tend to diminish the energy of people. Generally, employees live for Friday afternoons and dread a Monday morning. Yet workplaces should be a place that enhances people's lives. Work gives people a sense of purpose, routine, the opportunity to connect with others, and contributes to a feeling of being needed. These touchpoints are critical in enhancing people's lives and contribute positively towards their wellbeing.

We also generate energy by nourishing our wellbeing, more specifically our physical, emotional (feelings); mental (cognitive ability) and spiritual health (see Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale - WEMWS). If we accept the premise that energy/health is a key driver of individual, team and organisation performance then the questions to executives and the C-suite are:

1. Is the health/wellbeing of your employees a strategic priority? If not, why not?
2. If it is not a strategic priority, where is it on the risk matrix of the organisation, and the leadership comfortable with the actions you are taking to mitigate the risk of unhealthy, costly individuals?
3. If it is a strategic priority, are you comfortable with the level of investment you give to this priority vs your other strategic priorities?

I have encountered very few workplaces over the past five years that see the health of their employees, including their mental health, as a strategic priority. This is also evidenced by

Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer's book, 'Dying For A Paycheck'. His research shows how modern management harms employee health and workplace performance.

The stories are almost endless and the costs to people, their employees and the larger society are enormous.

Pfeffer refers to an inconvenient truth in organisations today – Social Pollution – where people don't really care about the health of employees and so it is not surprising that it is not a strategic priority. Simply put, we just don't care!

Other contributing factors could be:

1. They just do not know how to tackle this issue, it is too complex, and is complicated by the old adage of people's health is a personal matter and we don't engage in matters of a personal nature at work. Work is about being a "professional" and you should leave your personal issues at home. More and more it is my experience that this is an outdated view on the world of work, in fact we encourage people to bring their whole selves to work, until we do, and then it becomes unacceptable.
2. There is no organisation accountability to enhance the health of people at work. There is a great deal of organisation accountability to ensure we keep people safe at work, because legislation demands that we do. However, as Jeffrey Pfeffer would assert, we just don't care about the health of our employees and in the absence of legislation there is no need to enhance the lives/health of people at work and organisations take no accountability to try to achieve this.
3. There is no individual accountability for individuals to maintain their health, mainly because we don't see health as a driver of performance. We do not include energy in our performance management equation, in fact we assert that the only drivers of individual performance are skills, knowledge, behaviours and experience. We have never viewed energy as a key driver of performance, mainly because we did not know what gave people energy and we could not measure it.

We now know what gives people energy, i.e. their wellbeing and we can measure it. So why would we not now include it as a key performance driver and imagine as individuals may have a development plan based on skills, knowledge and behaviour, they also have a wellbeing plan, for which they will be held accountable. Why? Because wellbeing is driver of energy and energy is the most important driver of performance.

In the near future, we may see legislation in Britain that begins to 'force' organisations to take accountability for the health of their employees. Currently, work taking place within the health and safety executive regards development of psychological safety standards in

the work, suggests something is in the pipeline. Will your organisation be ahead of the curve in your efforts to enhance your colleagues' health?

Will you develop an employee value proposition that speaks to enhancing people's lives, a real differentiator, in today's stressful workplaces?

Will your organisation be a place where young talented people want to work and who more and more are demanding this of organisations?

What might organisation accountability that look like?

It will be a workplace where the health of employees is a strategic priority and where investing in resources that enhance the health of their people at all levels of the WEMWS (i.e. physical, emotional, mental and defining the purpose of the workplace beyond growth, profitability, etc) is normal. It will be a workplace where the budget for enhancing health is on par with that of safety, and not a limited budget available one week a year to run a wellbeing programme. The organisation will have a change programme in place that actually implements change to the way we work, as opposed to bananas beside the cash register in the canteen; or nuts in meeting rooms instead of sweets. In other words, a real strategic imperative and with what all other strategic imperatives entail, e.g. leadership advocacy etc.

Individual accountability, in my view, would entail building health into the performance management system. Positioning the need to enhance an individual's health as a development opportunity to perform better and NOT use as a stick to "sack" someone. But to have real wellbeing plans for individuals where they are able to draw on the resources the organisation invests in and to use those resources to enhance their health.

Development conversation with line managers where organisations have recognised the stressors and strains they cause, and just like holding people accountable for using the safety resources to stay safe, we do the same to ensure they engage in the resources to keep them health.

None of the above can be achieved if we do not address the stigma of mental and emotional health in workplaces. We want a workplace where people can have a truly honest, open and human conversation in agreeing the wellbeing plan.