

Why wellness programs don't work (and what to do instead)

By [Repa Patel](#) on April 4, 2021



According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 45% of Australians between the ages of 16 and 85 will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. One in five Australians has taken time off work in the past 12 months due to feeling mentally unwell (stressed, anxious, depressed or mentally unhealthy).

The ever-accelerating pace of change, the bombardment of continuous information and the pressure to 'be on' 24/7 can quickly overwhelm and cause stress. This has been heightened by the uncertainty of the "new next normal" as we navigate the COVID environment.

Many studies show the impact (good and bad) of workplace culture on business performance. In the 2019 Banking Royal Commission in Australia, Commissioner Hayne found clear failings in culture and governance which led to poor conduct on the part of some financial services providers. Studies have also shown that poor leadership increases the risk of sickness for employees and the risk of suffering a heart attack

Corporate wellness programs as a burnout solution

In an attempt to alleviate stress and stave off burnout, many Australian organisations are now offering wellness programs to their employees. The tools and services vary from discounted gym memberships, access to mindfulness and health apps and basic medical tests such as blood pressure checks.

The main aim of these programs is to support employees in becoming healthier and manage their mental health. There are many studies that claim to prove that wellness programs deliver some of these benefits. However, despite these studies, mental health issues, inflammatory diseases (high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes) and obesity are rising.

In a recent discussion with a well known Australian brand that offers an award winning wellness program, the GM of HR confirmed that the mental health of their workers had declined despite several years of offering this program. Uptake of the program was almost universal in the organisation, yet the mental wellbeing of their employees was declining.

This is supported by a study conducted in 2018. The Illinois Workplace Wellness Study of 5,000 people showed that:

- After 1 year, workplace wellness did not change an employee's health behaviours
- Employees who participated in the program were healthier before joining the program (which may explain some of the findings of the studies that show benefits delivered by these programs)

Why wellness programs fail

As the study shows, often the people that choose to participate in wellness programs are already healthy and have strong internal motivation to enhance their wellbeing.

There is also another factor that contributes to the failure: wellness programs aim to treat the symptoms (stress and burnout), rather than the cause. In my experience, it's workplace culture that causes stress. Many studies show the impact (good and bad) of workplace culture on business performance. In the 2019 Banking Royal Commission in Australia, Commissioner Hayne found clear failings in culture and governance which led to poor conduct on the part of some financial services providers.

Finally, in an increasingly VUCA world, leaders are struggling to manage their own stress levels and this can have a negative impact on their teams. Studies have shown that poor leadership increases the risk of sickness for employees and the risk of suffering a heart attack. Corporate wellness programs that focus entirely on individual employee wellness are ignoring one key factor: poor leadership leads to lower employee wellbeing.

What works to improve employee wellbeing?

Supporting your leaders to manage their own stress and curating a positive work culture are the two biggest impacts you can have on employee wellbeing. In practice, this means:

1. Increasing employee engagement

There's a strong link between how engaged employees feel and their performance and wellbeing. Research shows the characteristics of a positive culture are:

1. genuinely caring for work colleagues as you would for friends
2. being kind and compassionate when colleagues are suffering
3. avoiding blame and forgiving mistakes
4. inspiring each other at work
5. emphasising meaningfulness of the work
6. treating each other with respect, trust, integrity and gratitude

2. Supporting your team to find meaning and purpose in their work

A study by psychologist Andrew Steptoe and his team at University College London studied 7,300 adults over a very long period of time. They found that the more meaning and purpose they had in their lives, the more positive changes they experienced in the following four years. This included physical, social, psychological, emotional and economic prosperity.

3. To lead others, you must lead yourself

Leaders need to find their own meaning and purpose. If they put their oxygen mask on first, they are then able to help their team. Leaders with a strong sense of purpose (beyond financial gain, status and personal interest) create strong and sustainable performance cultures through high engagement.

4. The CEO and senior management team must be open to evidence based solutions rather than following industry trends

In my top Australian brand example above, the organisation accepted that their efforts at increasing wellbeing were failing.

The starting point to elevate employee wellbeing is to support your leaders to first solve the underlying problem of their own stress and lead more authentically and compassionately. And, of course, this starts with the board, CEO and her executive team.