

# Wellness at work: The promise and pitfalls

It takes more than a discounted health-club membership to move the needle on employee well-being.

**When Bob Chapman**, the CEO of global engineering company Barry-Wehmiller, talks about the impact that organizations have on their people, he gets emotional: “The person you report to at work can be more important to your health than your family doctor. We want to send people home safe, healthy, and fulfilled—all three dimensions.” Employers are in a unique position to be a good influence on health and general well-being. After all, working people spend more of their waking time on the job than anywhere else.

But what does it take to improve employee wellness? Is it, in fact, the business of business to do so? And can (or should) we measure the return? Members of the Consortium for Advancing Adult Learning & Development (CAALD), a group of learning authorities whose members include researchers, corporate and not-for-profit leaders, and McKinsey experts, recently debated these issues at its second annual meeting, in Boston. Their discussion suggests that wellness and work remain uneasy bedfellows, but our understanding of what it takes to make progress has grown, and so should the willingness of leaders to invest in their people at a time when the emerging workplace is confronting them with stress-inducing change.

## WHAT AILS WELLNESS?

**Ashley Williams**, deputy chief learning officer, McKinsey & Company: We all know that people are happier and more productive if they feel healthy.

Employers are in a unique position to be a good influence on health. But many workplace health and well-being programs are not that effective.

**Ramesh Srinivasan**, senior partner, McKinsey & Company: There haven't been enough at-scale experiments. People recognize that they can improve themselves by investing in fitness and diet and mindfulness. But to take it to the level of becoming a more productive employee or a better leader? The data is spotty.

**David Rock**, director, NeuroLeadership Institute: There's not a lot of good, independently validated science around what works, what actually creates wellness. There are baseline factors, such as reasonable food, access to exercise, and things like that. After that, the question becomes, "Where do you get the biggest bang for your buck?" And you have to motivate very individually. Some people are deeply motivated by autonomy. For other people, that's a total threat.

## BEYOND SLEEP AND EXERCISE

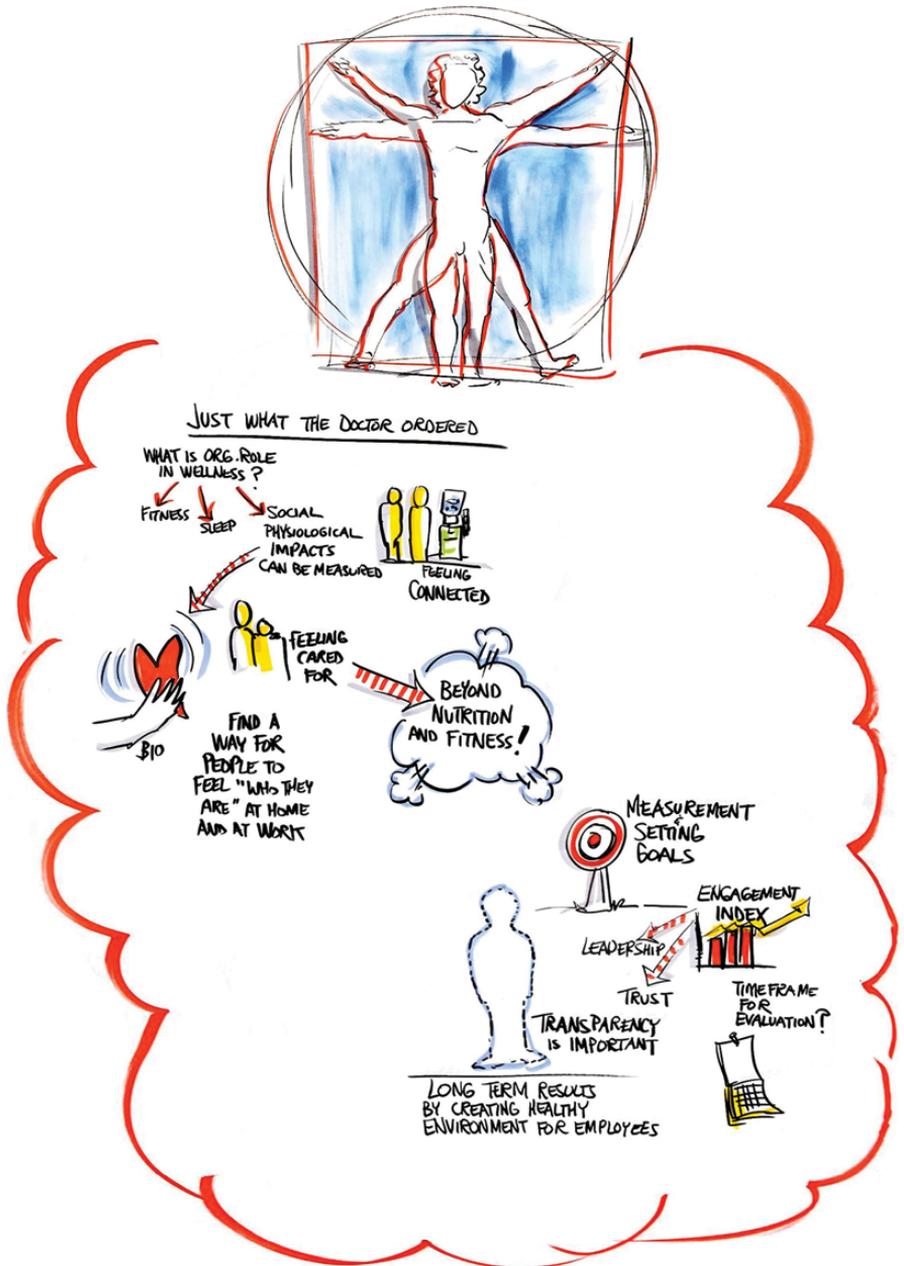
**Scott Taylor**, associate professor, Babson College: Some organizations are offering a portfolio of things because they see their greatest asset as their employees, and they believe in investing in them. The emerging research we have says that when you look at people not as objects but as human beings, they respond with higher performance. Engagement goes up, and not just engagement, but passion.

Up to 75 percent of people say that the most stressful part of their job is their immediate supervisor. I don't know too many managers who wake up and say, "I want to make life miserable for my people." Even so, we treat people at work in ways we'd never treat our family and friends. So the issue may not be that people need to learn how to care, it's that people need to learn how to care at work.

**David Rock**: Connecting people socially gets a much bigger bang for the company buck than trying to help people eat better. That's because social connectivity is deeply rewarding and activates a really nice oxytocin response. Most people's social resources are dangerously low, however. They don't have the tribe around them that their body craves. The feeling of loneliness, of isolation, is actually a pain response, the same as physical pain. In fact, the lack of social connection is twice as dangerous as smoking as a health factor. It's also more important than diet. So if you want to put in food stations with healthy food, that's great. But why not put in a social-

connection station, too—a work-free space where you're allowed to just hang out? We tend to think about what's easier to think about, not what's right to think about. So we go with food and exercise and those things. But actually, the intangible may be more critical.

## Fixing what ails wellness programs



Graphic illustrations created by Leah Sliverman, Crowley & Company

**Bob Chapman**, chairman and CEO, Barry-Wehmiller: The biggest cause of chronic illness is stress, and the biggest cause of stress is work. Stress is a machinist who walks in every day, gets ten things right and never hears a word, and gets one thing wrong and has his ass chewed out. Then he goes home and treats his family like he has been treated. Organizational stress is caused by people feeling that they're not appreciated. If we simply cared about the people whose lives we are privileged to lead, and send them home each night feeling valued, we could have much lower health costs. When 88 percent of people do not feel they're part of an organization that cares about them, we are manufacturing the healthcare crisis. And then we go to the byproduct, which is pills and medications and hospital visits.

## IS THERE A BUSINESS CASE FOR WELLNESS?

**Ramesh Srinivasan**: I do feel you can think about purpose and performance with equal weight. They don't need to be contradictory, as long as you take a longer-term view. At McKinsey, we are seeing that clients look at our impact not just in terms of performance but also in terms of the experience with us during a project. If our people are not truly excited, and if they haven't slept well or eaten well or exercised well, if they're nonmindful, clients are not going to have a great experience.

**Bob Chapman**: A senior executive at a big car company asked me what kind of return we got for this investment in culture. I asked, "Are you kidding me? Did you just ask me what kind of financial return I get for caring?" And he said, "At my company, we are extremely numeric." And I said, "That's pitiful." Then he told me that only 30 percent of the people would recommend a job there to a friend or family member. No kidding.

**Richard Boyatzis**, professor, Case Western Reserve University: There is research that says goal setting is not all that healthy—that every time we measure something, we go into a part of our brain that dehumanizes and objectifies things. On the other hand, can you imagine what it would be like to try to run an organization without setting goals? You can't plan, you can't allocate resources. We have to come to a place where we know how to use numbers and identify goals without objectifying people.

## NO QUICK FIXES

**Scott Taylor**: In the late 1990s, I was working with a company that was losing people and market share to a competitor that had a reputation as a great place to work. The CEO sent a memo to the managers that said, "We're

sick and tired of this company. We are now going to be the happy company.” It was mandated happiness. I literally ripped up the memo and threw it away.

**Richard Boyatzis:** The fact is that we have to do a bunch of these things at the same time, not sequentially. Yes, we have to work on people’s physical health and their psychological well-being. But at the same time, if we don’t improve people’s relationships at work, we’re putting Band-Aids on hemorrhages.

**Bob Chapman:** You can’t address wellness with exercise programs and then treat people like crap. Until organizations do a better job of letting their people know they are valued and cared for, we won’t even begin to move the needle on team-member well-being. 

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