

# Creating a Culture of **Wellbeing** at Work



Learn how to move beyond individual wellness programs and use training to create a culture of wellbeing at your organization.



## Introduction

Work stress is at an all-time high for many people. The pandemic increased burnout, anxiety is the top mental health issue in the workplace, and employees are quietly quitting.

You may have noticed these trends. But even if you haven't, you may have noticed another trend—an increased focus on workplace wellbeing.

Some wellbeing initiatives address employee stress, while others are offered as a hiring benefit. But what is wellbeing? Is it a program? A state of mind? A perk in a competitive job market?

And who is it for? Individuals? Teams? The organization as a whole?

We'll examine what wellbeing is, who it's for, and why traditional wellbeing initiatives will only get you so far.

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# Wellness vs. Wellbeing

In an article for Gallup, Ryan Pendell unpacks the differences between wellness and wellbeing. Wellness focuses on a healthy lifestyle, or “a state of physical health in which people have the ability and energy to do what they want to do in life, without chronic suffering.”

Wellbeing is a more comprehensive term, encompassing wellness **and** other aspects of life. According to another article in Gallup, it can be thought of as “how someone’s life is going.” In addition to physical wellness, wellbeing encompasses things like whether people like what they do every day, have meaningful relationships, manage their money well, and like where they live. When all these elements function together, they “add up to a thriving life.” Pendell points out that because the physical aspect is just one part of overall wellbeing, you can have **wellness** but not **wellbeing**.

Brassey, Herbig, Jeffrey, and Ungerman expand wellbeing into the concept of holistic health, which includes elements of Gallup’s definition plus spiritual health, or a sense that there is meaning in life. Holistic health correlates with confidence, adaptability, a sense of community, meaningful work, and psychological safety. Exclusion, bullying, demeaning remarks, and unclear expectations all contribute to poor holistic health and drive burnout.

## Why Employee Wellbeing Matters

But why should organizations want employees to have a thriving life or be holistically healthy? Isn’t taking care of physical wellness—to keep workers healthy and on the job—enough?

Not anymore. If you care about the wellbeing of your workplace, you have to care about the wellbeing of your workforce. Pendell notes that “the costs of poor employee wellbeing go far beyond insurance—they ultimately impact employee engagement, productivity, and performance.”

Wellbeing is directly related to issues of burnout and quiet quitting. The better people feel about their lives, the more engaged and enthusiastic they’ll be about work. Pendell’s article on wellbeing at work points out that “Gallup research has found that highly engaged employees typically work more hours per week than their counterparts, likely because they naturally find their work interesting and inspiring.”

Brassey, Herbig, Jeffrey, and Ungerman’s research shows that “workplace factors at the individual, team, and job levels have the strongest influence on holistic health.” Employees with lower wellbeing are less engaged and more likely to leave an organization. Their research indicates that reduced wellbeing is most acute in people aged 18-24, indicating a long-term problem for organizations as Generation Z enters the workforce.

Wellbeing has become “a requirement for high-performing teams,” according to Pendell. So, if organizations want to inspire effective teamwork between employees, they will have to do more than treat wellbeing as a bandaid, benefit, or perk.

# Individuals vs. Organizations

Let's recap: wellbeing is more comprehensive than wellness because it includes physical, social, financial, career, and community elements. And wellbeing matters because it lowers costs and increases engagement.

But who's responsible for it?

Many organizations offer wellness programs, initiatives, or benefits. However, the actual work of wellbeing is often seen as the employee's responsibility, not the organization's.

Pendell is clear that "simply offering a workplace wellness program—no matter how well-intentioned—provides no guarantee of improving employees' wellbeing." There are many reasons for this lack of improvement. Carolina Valencia notes that many employees are just too busy. Those already burned out may be less likely to take on another thing. And framing initiatives as individual self-care ignores wellbeing's social and community elements. Barton, Khan, Maitlis, and Sutcliffe argue against the self-care approach, saying, "when organizations offer individual solutions, it can send the message that employees are on their own."

An article on best practices for wellbeing programs notes, "while many employers see employee wellness as a personal issue, the fact that it has a direct impact on business outcomes makes it an issue employers must prioritize." The good news, according to Jennifer Dart's article on wellbeing and productivity, is that companies are beginning to recognize the need for "a shift in wellbeing responsibility from the employee to the employer."

## Healthy Organizations = Healthy Employees

Shifting wellbeing efforts from individuals to organizations requires a corresponding shift in perspective.

We often think that healthier employees will create healthier workplaces. As the research above shows, thriving people have more energy and enthusiasm, work longer hours, and contribute more toward their organizations.

But people don't thrive in a vacuum. Pendell points out that "working provides people a wealth of meaning in life." Brassey, Herbig, Jeffrey, and Ungerman show workplace factors are the strongest influence on holistic health. So, what if we look at it differently—that healthier **organizations** create healthier employees?

At Niche Academy, we've been committed to creating healthy, human-centered organizations for years. We've identified eight characteristics that measure organizational health, each directly impacting employees. Several align with what Brassey, Herbig, Jeffrey, and Ungerman identified as enablers, or "aspects of work that provide positive energy," like belonging, growth, and meaning. We believe in these characteristics so strongly that we developed an organizational health survey to help others assess their workplaces.

We know that healthy organizations contribute to overall employee wellbeing, which feeds innovation and engagement at work. We also know that cultures of wellbeing aren't a matter of individual employee decisions—they start at the top.

Healthy organizations don't necessarily focus on the shiny aspects of wellbeing. They may have meditation rooms, snacks, and on-site yoga. But their real commitment is to hiring and training empathetic leaders, offering good benefits, and building psychological safety. Nataly Kogan's article highlights many more of the less glamorous aspects of wellbeing, like workload, flexibility, managers, and team culture, as central to factors in a healthy organization.

## How to Improve Employee Wellbeing

You don't have to give up the free snacks and yoga rooms, but if you're looking to build a culture of wellbeing, it's also important to focus on more critical factors.

**Invest in psychological safety.** Amy Gallo defines psychological safety as “a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes—all without fear of negative consequences.” Psychological safety helps employees give and receive feedback. People who feel comfortable giving feedback may be more likely to talk with their teams or managers when they're experiencing frustration, anxiety, confusion, or conflict—addressing these issues before they result in burnout.

**Develop empathetic managers.** One of the best ways to increase psychological safety is to train managers to listen and communicate with empathy. According to Charlotte Lieberman, “when leaders encourage vulnerability and cultivate compassion at work, they enhance positive feelings and trust among workers—and that trust in leaders not only improves worker performance, it also helps employees feel safe opening up to their managers about personal challenges.” When leaders see staff as human, explicitly check in with them, and support those dealing with personal problems, wellbeing becomes infused throughout the organization.

**Be flexible where you can.** Flexible policies and practices can go a long way toward supporting a culture of wellbeing. As Lieberman notes, “employees' performance and wellbeing thrive in environments with flexibility around where and when work can happen.” Flexibility on start times, schedules, time off, and working location can give employees significant autonomy. At the same time, consider setting limits where it matters, like not checking email during certain hours or unplugging completely during vacations, to maintain a healthy work-life balance. And if employees *must* work fixed shifts, keep schedules consistent so they can plan around them.

**Focus on job fit.** Organizations can experiment with flexibility by matching employee strengths to their jobs. Pendell notes that “leaders and managers can help employees like what they do every day by maximizing an employee's unique personality, talents, and passions.” Pay attention and see what hidden talents employees have—because everyone benefits when people use their strengths to work on something they love. Here at Niche Academy, one of our instructional designers also happened to be a graphic designer with marketing experience. Her role

has shifted to Marketing Manager, where she can build and use her skills in a way that keeps her engaged and helps the company grow.

**Create opportunities for growth and adaptation.** Growth and learning are key enablers of holistic health. Organizations can support both through consistent, quality mentorship, training, and educational opportunities. One of our core values at Niche Academy is having a growth mindset, and there's a strong internal focus on helping people build their skills and pursue their passions—even if those skills and passions eventually take employees to other opportunities. In the meantime, though, people are engaged and the organization benefits from their expanding skill set.

**Offer quality benefits.** A steady paycheck is the foundation of financial wellbeing, but so is childcare, elder care, health care, and so much more. A strong benefits package helps ease the burden of many life stressors and lets employees approach work from a place of stability. Many organizations offer programs to help employees understand and maximize these benefits, like sessions with financial advisors, while others enhance them with traditional elements of wellness programs, like smoking cessation support and employee assistance programs.

**Encourage leaders to model wellbeing.** One day, our CEO announced that he wouldn't be at work for the next few days. It was Parent Week at his kids' school, and he'd be on lunch and recess duty. A new employee was shocked—not about what he was doing, but that he was **telling** us he was doing it. Taking time off from running a company to support his family gave the rest of us the freedom to do the same. When leaders express how they're taking care of their wellbeing—whether supporting their kids, taking advantage of counseling opportunities, or discussing mental health—they prioritize and model a company culture of wellbeing.

**Keep communication transparent—and human.** A major stressor for anyone is not knowing what's happening around them. Better communication is key to collaboration, problem-solving, and conflict resolution. A culture of wellbeing means everyone is willing and comfortable giving and receiving feedback. People can communicate up the chain, and managers and leaders share as much as possible. Conversations about wellbeing, in work and life, are common and normalized. Barton, Khan, Maitlis, and Sutcliffe suggest managers lead teams in taking a relational pause—*“a temporary, often brief, break from ongoing task work, in which people are invited to ask and answer the question, ‘How is our work affecting us as human beings?’”*

## Implementing Wellbeing Training

Building or changing a culture takes time. Training plays an important role in bringing everyone on the same page.

**Train employees.** Training employees establishes a culture of growth and learning in an organization. Carefully curated training paths focusing on confidence and adaptability can meet individual and organizational needs. You can also use training to increase flexibility by cross-training employees.

**Train managers.** We often hear that managers are dropped into their roles with no training—at all. Managers have a huge effect on their teams. Training on hiring, workload distribution, bullying, setting expectations, feedback loops, active listening, and conflict resolution can have major effects on wellbeing in the workplace and build empathetic, transparent relationships.

**Train leadership.** A culture of wellbeing starts at the top, so remember to train leaders at the highest levels, especially in communicating with empathy and vulnerability. Learning more about mental health and diversity, equity, and inclusion can help leaders understand common challenges and how to discuss them. Keeping current with proven practices for increasing job autonomy, flexibility, and meaning can help them evaluate and direct organizational culture.

## Niche Academy Learning Paths

A subscription to the Niche Academy platform includes access to hundreds of customizable tutorials developed by our in-house Learning Design Team. This ready-made content makes it easy to implement learning paths quickly. For example, here's a learning path to equip managers with the necessary tools and knowledge to nurture an environment that prioritizes wellbeing:

### Outcome: Enhance Inclusivity and Communication

#### Tutorials:

- DEI
  - Understanding the Basics
  - Understanding Implicit Bias
  - Cultural Competence
- Equitable Workplace Practices
  - Strategies for Welcoming New Employees
  - Seeing Staff as Human
  - Fairness in Responsibility
  - Establishing Explicit Expectations
  - Guiding Effective Conversations
  - Creating Feedback Loops
- Supporting Staff with Disabilities
  - Accommodations and Inclusive Environments
  - Recruiting, Hiring, and Onboarding
  - Working Together

- Effective Employee Surveys for Managers: Planning and Writing
- Effective Employee Surveys for Managers: Promoting and Analyzing
- Encouraging a Speak-up Culture

## Outcome: Foster Professional Growth and Development

### Tutorials:

- Establishing Mentorships in the Workplace
- Developing Goals with Direct Reports
- Developing Employee Career Paths

## Outcome: Address Specific Needs

### Tutorials:

- Supporting Staff Dealing with Personal Problems
- Addressing Bullying for Managers
- Addressing Microaggressions
- Conflict Resolution for Managers
- Creating an Employee Performance Plan
- Recognizing Sexual Harassment
- Responding to Sexual Harassment Claims for Managers

Following this path, managers will learn to create a supportive, inclusive, and productive work environment that promotes wellbeing and drives organizational success.

<https://www.nicheacademy.com/request-demo>



# Build a Culture of Wellbeing Today

Nataly Kogan says it best: “small things make a big difference if you practice them consistently.”

Yes, having fruit in the breakroom and on-site bike rentals are great practices. But we encourage you to think about the small things that will have the biggest **systemic impact** on wellbeing: stability, transparency, flexibility, open communication, and psychological safety.

Focusing on how healthy organizations create healthy employees can increase the wellbeing of both. It takes work and commitment, but you'll see increased employee satisfaction, lower turnover, and a better company culture.

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