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## TAKE A LOAD OFF

The importance  
of nurturing a  
culture of caring

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# Take a LOAD OFF

The Importance of  
Nurturing a Culture  
of Caring

BY MEAGHAN JANSEN, MSC, BSC, BA

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of life for Canadians. Our days have been full of uncertainty and challenges, and we have had to adjust our familiar routines and deal with the effects of blurring work-life boundaries.

In a recent study by Statistics Canada, one-quarter of Canadians reported experiencing high levels of stress, and nearly half considered their stress levels to be worse than prior to the pandemic. Another study indicates that mental health concerns such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, and loneliness remain nearly as high as they were in late May 2020.

Employee health and wellness has always been important, but it has taken on even more significance as we try to re-establish our lives and define the new realities of our workplaces. Employers and employees alike have faced considerable change. We have had to adapt to remote work and, for those who are able to return to the office, careful planning to address health and safety concerns and adjust policies and procedures has been necessary. Whether working from home or in the office, a workplace culture that ensures employees feel comfortable and supported in both their job responsibilities and their life outside of that role is key.

At the foundation of employee wellness is the importance and value of building a culture of caring. How we treat people matters. In a caring work environment, the employer manifests its commitment to its people by taking actions that foster happy, engaged, and healthy employees. This motivates individuals to be the best versions of themselves, which in turn delivers better results for everyone.

So, how can employers nurture this culture to support employee well-being?

## Establish purpose and empower employees

Having a sense of purpose helps us to be more resilient in the face of challenge. Within the workplace, a collective purpose creates a unified culture that brings employees together and reminds them that they are part of something meaningful. It's also important to empower employees to bring out their best and work towards their own goals – professional, personal, and health-specific.

- Reaffirm what your company stands for and remind employees of how they are included. Goals and objectives may have changed as a result of the pandemic and it's important that employees know what these changes are and how they are able to contribute.
- Set realistic expectations for employees as they are transitioning back to work. There will be an adjustment period for everyone and it's important to be flexible as everyone acclimates. While work responsibilities are essential, employers need to communicate that their purpose includes helping employees adapt to a new kind of workplace. It also means being flexible as employees continue to balance work and family.



- Adopt a *Communicate to Serve* approach to ensure employees know they have access to the information that they need to be productive. This includes health and wellness information to support employees with challenges that may be interfering with that productivity. Share and promote relevant information via a bi-weekly wellness video or through a monthly wellness newsletter.

## Understand what drives your employees

We know there's a relationship between employee well-being and work performance and engagement. As we return to work, employees may be feeling distracted or stressed. They may not be at their best because healthy routines fell to the wayside as they were trying to balance work responsibilities and home life with little separation between the two.

- Communicate the importance of health and wellness to employees and communicate your commitment to supporting their well-being. This is especially important during this time of uncertainty. There are still many unknowns and many will continue to experience anxiety as we navigate the coming months.
- Consider implementing a Health Risk Assessment or a Pulse Check Survey to better understand current employee health and wellness concerns. This can drive the tools, resources, and initiatives you offer. If employees feel supported in dealing with health and wellness concerns rather than struggling with them alone, they will be better able to engage in their work.
- Schedule regular check-ins with employees to ask how they are doing. Make a point to touch on work responsibilities and also personal well-being. This is an opportunity to understand what kind of support employees may need. It also establishes a relationship that encourages open communication between employees and their managers.

## Foster social connections

Workplace relationships are important. As a result of shutdowns, employees have spent much more time apart than usual. Hopefully, your company was able to leverage technology and continue fostering these relationships, but employees who were accustomed to face-to-face interactions have likely been missing them.

- Encourage and create opportunities for employees to reconnect with co-workers. If remote work is still the reality for your team, continue to connect virtually. Go beyond the work meetings and incorporate non-work social time. Host morale-boosting events like lunchtime yoga sessions, virtual paint nights, or Friday happy hour with your pets.
- For employees that are returning to the office, look for ways to reintroduce face-to-face time. Share a picnic lunch if you have an outdoor space or rooftop area or encourage employees to take a break with a partner in spaces where they can still practice physical distancing. Spark conversation through simple activities. Ask employees to personalize their desks when they return to work or organize theme days like wear your favourite team jersey.
- Challenges (team or individual) are a great way to promote conversation and social interaction while also promoting healthy habits. Working from home has resulted in irregular routines and employees may appreciate a fun way to get back on track with nutrition, exercise, and self-care. Leverage Health Risk Assessment results and employee feedback to understand topics that are interesting and relevant to your team.
- Take the time to develop a wellness strategy. If you have a wellness program in place, review initiatives and offerings to ensure they meet current needs. If you don't have a wellness program, determine what you can implement. You may not have the resources to implement a comprehensive strategy in time for your employees' return, but any well-designed offering can provide value. The important thing to remember is that effective wellness solutions should become systems that are integrated across your organization rather than stand-alone or siloed initiatives.
- Leverage your wellness committee and community partners to help spread the word about your commitment to employee wellness. Ensure employees are aware of the resources and tools available to them. Zone in on key themes (e.g. mental health, stress management, financial wellness) that resonate with your employees.
- Consider introducing one-on-one health coaching if it's not something your company already offers. Personalized coaching will help employees focus on wellness concerns that matter to them and their families, while benefiting from a very supportive relationship.

A culture of caring isn't something you can establish quickly. It takes planning, strategic implementation, and most importantly, follow-through and support by leadership. But creating a positive work culture where everyone feels valued, welcomed and respected is vital to an organization's success.

EWSNetwork has had the pleasure of working with some wonderful organizations including London's own Libro Credit Union and London Hydro. Learn more about the power of building a workplace culture of caring and meet some of the amazing leaders and employees who have worked hard to create positive change through wellness within their workplaces. [[www.ewsnetwork.com/culture-of-caring](http://www.ewsnetwork.com/culture-of-caring)]

## More meaningful investments in your employees

Employee wellness is an essential component to the return-to-work plan. We aren't returning to the workplace as it was, so employees have a lot of adjusting to do. Put extra emphasis on supporting employees' mental health, physical health, and overall well-being. Knowing that they have support and resources available to help them navigate any health-related concerns they are facing can help ease the transition.



**W**e wanted to find out more about how people in London's business community prioritize wellness in their lives. Employers have a responsibility to promote a culture of caring in their organizations, but it's also important for individuals to develop their own unique (and healthy) ways to cope with the everyday stresses of life and work. So we asked them:

## How do you manage stress in your life, both personally and professionally?

Being a budding entrepreneur in a foreign land has its own challenges, not to mention the stress that it brings along. Starting my day with a few minutes of early morning meditation with deep breaths followed by a short video call with my family actually helps me to handle personal anxieties through the day. Also, conscious efforts to avoid people who impart negative vibes magnifies my self-confidence. On the professional front, getting a "to-do list" ready in the morning makes half my work done as I become mentally prepared to meet every challenge head on. A game of ping pong in the evenings during a break is rejuvenating. I've been a trained violinist since my childhood and enjoy those few hours that I play which truly enhances my life.

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