

HOW LEADERS CAN BUILD A CULTURE OF WELL-BEING IN A HYBRID WORLD

By Marla Warner and Ann Gomez

AT A GLANCE

- 7 min read
- The pandemic has created an emphasis on well-being.
- Law firms aren't known to be cultures of optimism.
- Try these ideas for improving well-being across your teams.



As we navigate out of the pandemic fog, people's lives have changed, and perspectives have shifted.

Given our collective experience, it's no surprise that well-being is a hot topic. Globally, mental health and well-being continue to be in the spotlight as rates of burnout soar (see "[Global Talent Trends 2022-2023](#)," Mercer, 2022).

Well-being has a direct impact on employee satisfaction and engagement, which directly influences key business outcomes. Unwell

colleagues are also more disengaged, unmotivated, and unproductive (see "[The Future of Wellness at Work](#)," Global Wellness Institute, 2016). On the contrary, healthy and energized team members are more motivated and engaged.

Research by the Global Wellness Institute shows associates cite inadequate support for health and well-being as a reason why they are considering leaving. Conversely, they cite positive support for their well-being [as a reason to stay](#). In this war for talent, an

emphasis on well-being is an essential part of retaining top talent.

The research is clear that leaders play a critical role in the overall wellbeing of their teams and in the prevention of burnout. In order to lead a team through this "next normal" of establishing a hybrid workplace, leaders need to navigate the balancing act of "focusing on performance outcomes while supporting workers' engagement and well-being." (See "Employee Burnout: Causes and Cures," Gallup, 2022.)

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Many organizations know *why* they need to promote well-being across their teams. But knowing and doing are two separate things. To help leaders champion a culture of well-being at work, we'd like to share some key foundations along with practical strategies that organizations and leaders can deploy.

Foster Psychological Safety

Prominent researcher Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, defines psychological safety as “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.” While considered a key foundation in high-performing teams and organizations, law firms have been found to be low in psychological safety, according to 2021 ALM survey data on the disparity between equity partners and associates. Here are four practices to help leaders foster psychological safety:

- **Demonstrate authenticity and vulnerability** by sharing personal stories, feelings, and concerns. Invite team input and encourage a diversity of voices.

- **Model and support positive and respectful behaviors** and collaboration.
- **Find opportunities to mentor and coach** and encourage team members to coach one another.
- **Frequently recognize achievements** and the contributions by individuals during meetings, by email to the practice team, or one-on-one in person.

Boost Positive Emotions

Research demonstrates that regularly experiencing a range of positive emotions boosts our resilience. But law firms aren't known to be cultures of optimism. In fact, lawyers are trained to be pessimists. Where skepticism and pessimism play a role in “lawyering,” positive emotions build psychological resilience and enduring personal resources such as self-competence and a sense of autonomy. How can you and other leaders support positivity and optimism in the challenging environment of a law firm?

High-performing teams communicate 5.6 times more positive comments than negative overall.

- **Be mindful of pessimism and skepticism** seeping into all aspects of your life and reflect on where you can let it go. Avoid letting these negative emotions spill over into how you interact with your team.
- **Set a tone** for providing more positive comments than negative ones within your team; research has shown high-performing teams communicate 5.6 times more positive comments than negative overall (see Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy, “The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in the Performance of Business Teams,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004).
- **Be intentional about creating small and varied boosts** of positive emotion for yourself — a morning walk, a mid-day stretch, petting your dog, and saying thank you to a colleague are all ways to bolster your positivity.

Model Empathy

According to recent research, empathy is becoming the most important leadership skill today — it is the superpower of 2022 (see “[Why Empathy Is a Superpower in the Future of Work](#),” Catalyst, October 2020). Close behind empathy is the ability to demonstrate compassion, sometimes referred to as empathy in action. Empathy can be a powerful antidote to feelings of stress and anxiety and contribute to overall well-being. In 2021, Volta Talent Strategies found that 45% of lawyers studied wanted “[demonstrated empathy and understanding](#)” from law firm leaders/partners.” Studies show that empathy has some significant constructive effects, including innovation, engagement, retention, and heightened mental health.

You can flex your leadership empathy muscle when you:

- **Put yourself in the other's shoes** and ask, “What might that person be thinking and feeling?”
- **Inquire about specific challenges** and listen attentively to their responses.

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- **Make a habit of empathetic recognition**, a practice that allows people to feel seen, heard, and recognized, and decreases the likelihood of burnout.

Ideally compassion and action follow on the heels of empathy. Offers of support when learning of someone's struggles, or a healthy exchange of ideas and perspectives, are both examples of compassionate outcomes.

Gratitude is another "superpower" deserving of mention. When authentically expressed, people feel valued when thanked. A positive dynamic is fostered where people want to bring their best. Sometimes, given our [natural negativity bias](#), it can be impactful to acknowledge what is good and working well. But it's well worth the effort. Gratitude comes in many forms, including toward yourself by getting enough sleep, eating well, and regularly exercising to counter stress and fatigue, increase well-being, and develop resilience in the face of adversity (see Robert A. Emmons and Robin Stern, "Gratitude as a psychotherapeutic intervention," *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, Vol. 69(8), 846–855, 2013).

Who can you thank today?

Foster Connections

The past few years have highlighted just how important our relationships are to our physical and mental health. Humans are wired with a need to belong and to be a part of something — to form connections and have shared experiences. Leaders can support this basic human need, especially as they recover and rebalance after a challenging period.

Nurturing high quality connections (HQCs) — brief interactions where both parties feel seen and experience a sense of mutual regard — is one way to support workplace connections. Additionally, these brief exchanges provide a range of performance-related benefits (see John Paul Stephens, Emily Heaphy, and Jane E. Dutton, "High-Quality Connections," University of Michigan).

HQCs are like interpersonal vitamins. Research has found that interactions leave people with a heightened sense of energy and focus, more grateful, optimistic, and positive about the future. Organizations experience the benefits of HQCs too. These simple interactions boost collaboration, communication, and psychological well-being, resulting in higher quality performance by all.

How can you and your fellow leaders foster connections across your teams?

- **Work with your team** to find opportunities to come together in person.
- **Encourage people to be fully present during** both virtual and in person meetings. Even the presence of a phone can diminish levels of engagement and connection.
- **Regularly check in with each team member** and ask questions to truly understand how they are doing.
- **Bring awareness to your own emotional state** during meetings. As the leader, your energy will be the most contagious in the room.

Scott Sonenshein, organizational psychologist and author, describes these pandemic times as an opportunity for a reset, particularly in the role of leaders. Leaders who prioritize their own well-being can better support their teams by demonstrating their own ability to be healthy and perform at their best, while influencing those with whom they work. On that note, what are you doing to prioritize your well-being?

If you'd like to discuss more strategies to elevate your team's well-being, connections, and productivity, we would be happy to help. +



Marla Warner

Marla Warner (marla@forhealth.ca) is the Principal of [For Health Wellbeing Solutions](#), a training and coaching consultancy focusing on building positive workplace cultures and supporting people to enhance their resilience, performance, and mental health.



Ann Gomez

Ann Gomez (ann.gomez@clearconceptinc.ca) is the founding President of [Clear Concept Inc.](#), an international company helping legal professionals and other industries do their best work, with training in productivity, collaboration, mindset, and well-being

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