

Communication in 2020 And Beyond: Talking About Wellbeing

Unsurprisingly, the events of 2020 have seen the topic of employee wellbeing shoot to the top of many leadership agendas.

Life has changed significantly for so many people, in so many ways. For many people, home is now the office, and the office is now home. Individuals have had to navigate working while also fulfilling caring responsibilities, be they for children or for elderly relatives. With all of this taking place against a backdrop of uncertainty and fear. Fear of the virus itself but also concerns about job security and the broader economic implications of lockdown.

Meanwhile, our ability to enjoy ourselves, to celebrate and to punctuate our working lives with fun, rest and relaxation, has been severely impacted by restrictions on social gatherings, the complications of international travel, and the partial, or total, shutdown of the hospitality and leisure sectors.

It's no wonder that companies are worried about their people and how they are coping in this environment. However, for senior HR professionals and company executives, there is no playbook for these events.

We spoke to Kate Mason-Keaney, Founding Partner of Ground and Air, a management consultancy with a specific focus on the link between wellbeing and performance, to learn from her experience and perspective on supporting ourselves, our colleagues and our teams.

What is 'wellbeing'?

Wellbeing is a big topic and means different things to different people.

Kate described a sense of wellbeing as being specific to each individual and, for that person, what that means can change from day-to-day, week-to-week, or month-to-month, depending on their circumstances.

In essence, it refers to our personal sense of health, happiness, 'being in flow' and comfort.

How can we look after our own wellbeing?

Kate shared her top tips for taking care of our own wellbeing:

1. Keep an eye on your own habits, patterns and mood on a daily basis

Take time to notice - and find a means to record - what is going on for us individually each day. Ask yourself questions and note your responses -

- How is my energy today?
- What am I doing for myself?
- What am I doing for others?
- Where am I spending my time?
- What emotions am I feeling?
- How does my internal voice sound? Is it supportive, or critical?
- What mood am I in?

If you struggle to define or find the right language to describe your mood, consider using a tool such as the POMS questionnaire [<https://www.brianmac.co.uk/poms.htm>].

Originally designed in the 70s, the Profile of Mood States (POMS) helps individuals to self-assess their mood across categories of Tension, Anger, Fatigue, Depression and Confusion.

Mood is one of the biggest predictors of positive well-being and, conversely, burnout. Refining our understanding and awareness of our moods is a good preventative action.

The Healthy Mind Platter, created by David Rock (et al), is another helpful framework for considering the constituents of good mental health. It can help us to assess how well we are balancing seven distinct and important neuro-cognitive activities, ranging from sleep to play time, that nurture the mind.

Becoming more aware of changes in ourselves and our mood is the starting point to be able to take action and feel more in control of how we experience life day-to-day.

2. Create new structures and define boundaries between work and home:

The loss of well-established routines has been a key consequence of the pandemic which has had a big negative impact on our sense of wellbeing.

Kate advises individuals to:

Use journaling at the beginning and end of the day - this involves writing down on paper any thoughts which are on your mind at that point in time, or

questions which are occurring to you. In the morning this can help to structure your approach to how you are going to spend your time and, in the evening, it can help to shake off the challenges of the day and balance you before bedtime.

Get a change of scene and some fresh air - the usual changes of scene we would experience in a pre-pandemic working day have gone with no commute and no need to venture outside to seek food! Make sure you leave your home, if you can, for a walk - even if it's only for 10 minutes.

Create rituals to separate time and mark the end of the working day - clear down your work space, shut your home office door...think of things you can do to signal the end of work time and to keep 'you' time distinct.

How should we support each other as colleagues?

It can be hard to know how to have these types of conversation, but Kate's advice is that the most important first step is to create dedicated time and space to talk about wellbeing as a team.

- As a group, think about how you talk about what's going well, what's not going well and where there are opportunities to support one another better.
- 'Temperature check' type surveys similar to engagement surveys can be helpful, particularly ones which examine questions of energy, productivity, psychology, physiology, restoration and recovery. Kate uses a tool called The Energy & Performance profiler which she has found is a great starting point for individuals and teams.
- Consider the team's collective narrative and rhetoric - is it positive and can-do, or demoralised and fatigued? How we sound is a strong indication of the state of our wellbeing. If it sounds fatigued, what do individuals and the team as a whole want to change or pay better attention to so that healthy performance can return?
- Be conscious that many teams might have found the earlier stages of the pandemic galvanising - but we may be coming to a point where those initial effects are wearing off and energy levels are seriously depleted. As such, does our approach need to shift from the practices we acquired in 'crisis mode' to a more sustainable way of doing things that supports people in the longer term?
- Watch out for where teams are starting to work unconventional hours, slipping onto the laptop late at night or over the weekend, and potentially blurring boundaries at the expense of long-term wellbeing.

What can leaders do to support their teams?

Kate's advice to leaders is to:

- **Ensure that there is plenty of open dialogue between managers and individuals.** Make it as easy as possible for people to be open about their concerns and challenges. Make extensive use of clean, open questions e.g. "How are you?", "What's happening for you at the moment?", "Is there anything you would like to talk about?", "What can I help you with?", "What is getting in your way or making life more difficult?"
- **Consider experimenting with a 'Please Do/ Please Don't' framework which allows individuals to share with managers and colleagues how they want people to interact with them at this time.** E.g. "Please do come to me with any questions or concerns", "Please don't feel you need to copy me on every e-mail", "Please pick up the phone if you would rather talk than Zoom" etc. this simple language and an encouragement to think about and share please do's and please don'ts can be very enabling for everyone and encourage some more mindful interactions and practices.
- **Create more opportunities for generating and maintaining social capital.** Find opportunities to connect with one another, not just on tasks or the transactional nature of our work, but on a human and social level. This could mean virtual team socials, ad hoc check-ins and informal catch-ups, 1:1, or time out to walk and talk.
- **Don't forget the old-fashioned telephone call.** Video calls have become our new principal means of communicating with one another at work. But, consider the possibility that sometimes the telephone might work better for people. There is less pressure on physical appearance, and it allows us to focus more closely on how the other person sounds. It also enables us to move around while we talk (we are all spending too much time sitting down at the moment), get out in the fresh air and daylight to talk on the move.

What can leaders do to look after themselves?

This has been - and remains - an incredibly stressful period for leaders everywhere. It's essential that leaders pay attention to their own wellbeing needs before helping others.

Kate's top tip for leaders is to find a 'safe space' or 'outlet' to talk through things, share concerns, take stock and reflect and muse on what's working and what's not. This could be with a professional coach, or somebody else within your network who can be a confidant or sounding board. There is a lot

of pressure on leaders to 'know', to lead, to galvanise, to decide and to positively role model day in and day out.

If we are to maintain the strength and resilience to support and look after other people, we must first and foremost ensure that we are actively acknowledging the importance of our own wellbeing and continuing to look after it.

Communication in 2020 and beyond - let's make it better

Feel free to share these thoughts as widely as you like

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