

# IMPROVING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING THROUGH LEADERSHIP

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Recently, the concept of employee wellbeing has begun to shift. Although many organizations and human resources professionals acknowledge that the wellbeing (i.e., a person's current state of health and happiness) of their workforce is important for increasing engagement and reducing turnover, recent events have shown that providing employee benefits and wellbeing resources alone is insufficient ([Limeade & Quantum Workplace, 2016](#); [Umland, 2018](#)). Yet, in a spring 2020 study conducted by InVista, when leaders were asked about the impact of COVID-19 and how they plan to promote wellbeing, answers were limited to fitness challenges and physical/emotional health discussion boards (2020a). To get to the root of the issue, organizations need to understand what impacts their employees' wellbeing and help build a strong wellbeing culture.

The key to changing organizational culture lies with leadership. Leaders are often in a position to influence their employees, enabling them to have a strong effect on organizational culture.

## **LEADERSHIP'S EFFECT ON CULTURE**

Organizational leaders such as managers and supervisors are significant sources of feedback and support for employees and help to set the tone for culture within their department or area. A supportive culture developed by leadership not only has the power to impact wellbeing but also influences organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction ([Berson et al., 2008](#)). In a recent organizational study on employee retention conducted by InVista (2019), it was found that a lack of supervisor support—meaning that supervisors do not value employee contributions, offer assistance, or care about employee wellbeing—was a major driver in employees' intention to quit. In a separate study on employee wellbeing, InVista found that the higher employees rate manager support, the longer they intend on staying with the company and the less likely they are to be a turnover risk (InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).



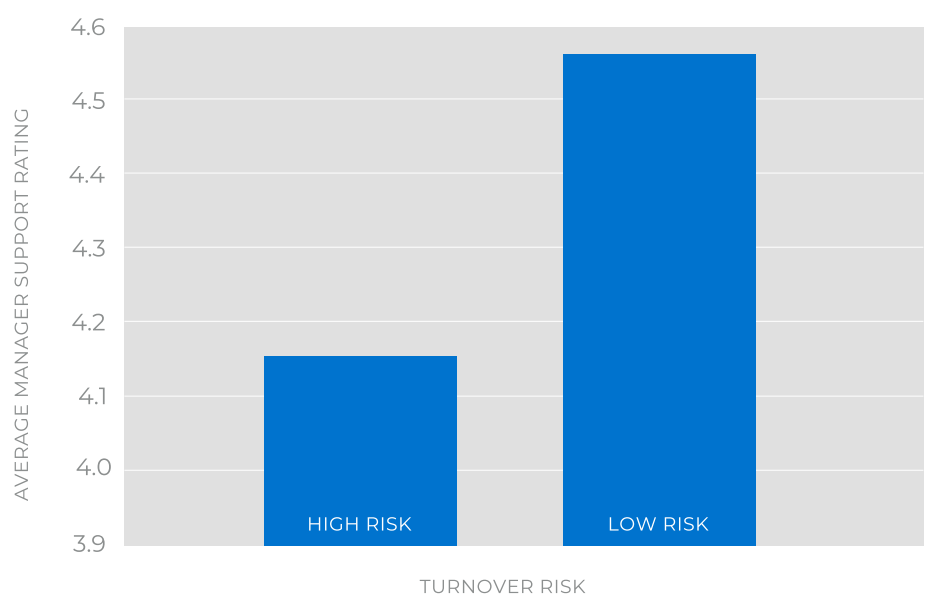
### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANAGER SUPPORT AND LENGTH OF TIME EXPECTED TO STAY WITH THE COMPANY

ESTIMATED LENGTH OF TIME EXPECTED TO STAY AT THE ORGANIZATION



Data from InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TURNOVER RISK AND MANAGER SUPPORT



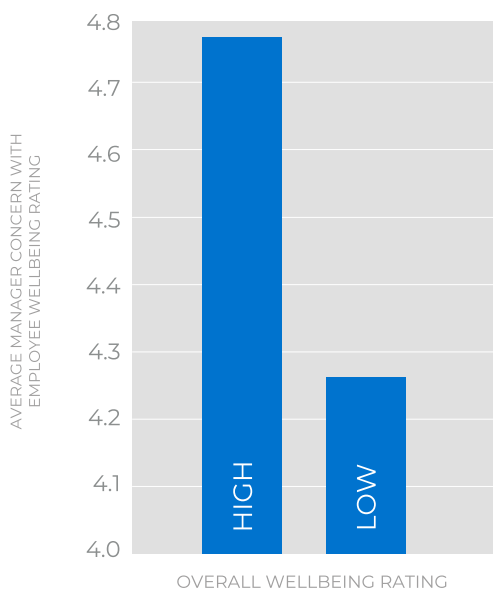
Data from InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

According to research, when employees feel supported by their manager, it makes a difference. In summer 2020, InVista conducted a series of wellbeing surveys in various industries to better understand employee wellbeing and provide organizations with key insights. The results highlighted the importance of supervisor support in relation to employee wellbeing. Employees who experienced higher levels of overall wellbeing rated manager support 11% higher than those who were experiencing lower levels of overall wellbeing. In addition, they believed that their managers cared more about their wellbeing (InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

The research highlights the important role leadership plays in enhancing employee wellbeing. Multiple leadership styles can have a positive influence on culture and wellbeing. The next section discusses various leadership styles that, in combination, can be utilized to enhance the wellbeing of your team.

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANAGER CONCERN WITH EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND OVERALL WELLBEING**



Data from InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d

## WELLBEING-ENHANCING LEADERSHIP STYLES



### INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

In the inclusive leadership style, the words and actions of the leader show they welcome and have appreciation for other ideas and contributions (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). These leaders show support by asking for and listening to employees' ideas and incorporating those ideas into decisions. They also are sensitive to their employees' needs and consider them in decision making. These attributes help create a culture of psychological safety in which employees are comfortable speaking their minds without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety helps create a culture of support, fairness, and trust, which is critical when employees want to voice their wellbeing needs. Inclusive leadership also has the power to increase commitment, satisfaction, conflict resolution, engagement, performance, innovation, and resilience (Bortini et al., 2018).





## EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

Empowering leaders' employees feel confident taking on additional responsibility in their own work because they are provided with the power to do so (Gupta, 2016). This style encourages employees to speak up and take charge of their own wellbeing within the workplace. Much like inclusive leadership, empowering leadership has the ability to increase trust between leaders and employees, especially when this style of leadership is focused on mentoring and supporting employee development (Lee et al., 2018). Increased trust combined with empowerment can help employees feel comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns about work and wellbeing to their supervisors. Research has also shown that empowering leadership has the ability to lower perceived stress levels and positively impact employees' mental health (Tripathi & Bharadwaja, 2020).



## SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

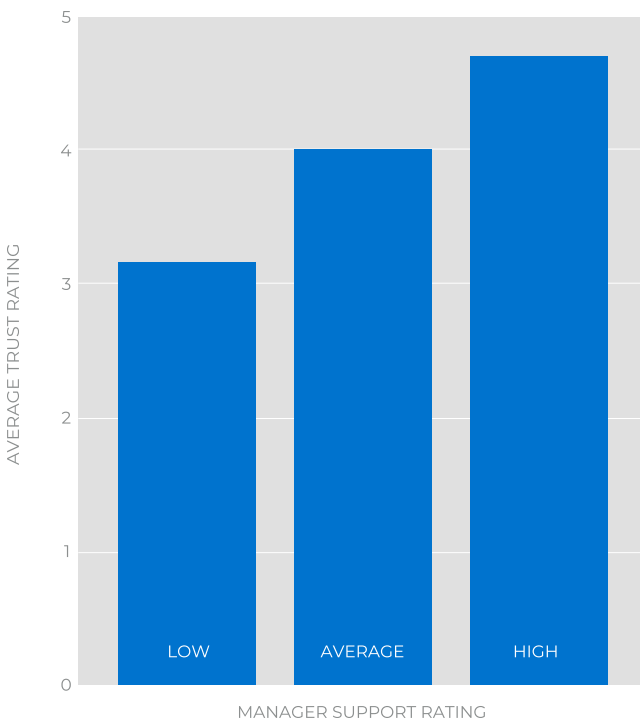
Another wellbeing-enhancing leadership style is supportive leadership. Leaders who have this style support their employees by helping them to overcome difficult situations; they are open, honest, and fair (Schmidt et al., 2014). Like empowering and inclusive leaders, supportive leaders also create a culture of trust. InVista's wellbeing study found that, as manager support increases, employees increasingly feel as though they are trusted to do their job (2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

Supportive leadership is set apart from empowering and inclusive leadership in that there is more direct involvement in employees' wellbeing journey. Supportive leaders who prioritize wellbeing are heavily invested in helping their employees identify when their wellbeing is suffering and help problem solve when employees are faced with challenges that impact their personal and professional health. Supportive leaders who are focused on wellbeing also advocate for and reward healthy behaviors and accomplishments. In a recent study by Hero Health and Mercer (2018), they found that 91% of employees in organizations that have comprehensive wellbeing programs along with leaders who publicly recognize their employees for their healthy behaviors reported health improvements. Eighty-seven percent of those organizations also reported improved medical costs.

## HOW TO BECOME A LEADER WHO PROMOTES WELLBEING

Taking ideas from each of the leadership styles listed above, we've created a series of tips (Belcher, n.d.; Bortini et al., 2018; Bourke & Titus, 2019; CFI, n.d.; Dow, 2017; Klass, 2017) that will help managers become leaders who support and enhance employee wellbeing.

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
MANAGER SUPPORT AND TRUST**



Data from InVista, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d

“If 2020 has taught me anything, it is how critical it is to take care of myself and promote that our team does the same for themselves. If we do not care for ourselves, we cannot take care of others.”

— Kristin Greco, InVista CEO



## FOCUS ON YOUR OWN WELLBEING

Without understanding and prioritizing your own wellbeing journey, it's difficult to advise and support others. When people have a deeper understanding of what wellbeing means in their own life, they can better understand what it takes for employees to take control of their own wellbeing, and they can serve as an important model for their group. Here are some key strategies for improving wellbeing.

**1. Be self-aware.** Ask yourself where your wellbeing is struggling and where are you doing a good job. This is important because your level of wellbeing can affect not only your current mood but also your professional life. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Have I been feeling an unusual amount of stress lately?
- What do I do when I feel the most stress?
- Am I happy with my overall physical health?
- Do I get enough rest?
- Am I able to bounce back from challenges?
- Am I satisfied with my work–life balance?
- What strategies am I taking to improve my own wellbeing?

Chances are, some of your answers are similar to those of your employees. When there is alignment, you will be better able to empathize.

**2. Educate yourself on what wellbeing looks like for you.**

How do your own work–life balance, emotional health, physical health, and social relationships look? Are you happy with the state of these areas in your life?

**3. Hold yourself accountable for your own wellbeing.**

Once you have identified areas in which you want to improve your wellbeing, create a plan and stick to it. For example, if you determine you want to have stronger social connections, try to call a friend once a week. If you want to improve your sleep, work on maintaining a sleep schedule.





## ESTABLISH TRUST

Employees must be able to trust you in order to share their concerns about their wellbeing. Without trust, they may believe they will be punished for revealing their struggles, or they may think their concerns won't be heard. Consequently, they may avoid talking about their wellbeing challenges and ignore them instead.

In order to develop trust, leaders can incorporate the following behaviors:

- 1. Show respect** by listening to what employees have to say and consider their viewpoint.
- 2. Be open and honest** in your communication about all aspects of work that are appropriate to discuss, not just wellbeing.
- 3. Follow through** on wellbeing initiatives that you, the company, or employees organize, implement, or discuss.
- 4. Build relationships** by actively checking in with your employees. Employee check-ins can be as formal as one-on-one meetings or as informal as having a monthly department lunch.
- 5. Support your employees** by providing timely feedback aimed at helping them develop and maintain an open-door policy to show you are available when they need support. This helps increase the perception of fairness within your team—often a key driver of wellbeing (InVista, 2020d).
- 6. Ensure your decisions are fair** by taking time to review and consider all options, involving others in the decision when possible, and explaining your decision to others (Brockner, 2006). This will also help you make better decisions.

It's important to note that both establishing and maintaining trust are important. Once trust is lost, it's often difficult to get it back.





“Our employees are the most important aspect of our organization, responsible for providing for our Customers. As leaders, it is our role to open the wellbeing dialogue and model the importance of wellbeing to our organization. Not only is it good practice, it’s also tied to long-term business results.”

— Kristin Greco, InVista CEO



## SHAPE AND MAINTAIN YOUR WELLBEING CULTURE

Once you have a solid understanding of your own wellbeing and have cultivated an environment of trust, you will be ready to create and sustain a strong wellbeing culture within your team. The following actions will help you improve the wellbeing of your employees.

- 1. Communicate** the importance of wellbeing to your employees. If you don’t indicate that wellbeing is a priority for you, it will be hard for your employees to make it their priority.
  - Find ways to incorporate wellbeing into your conversations. For example, you can mention wellbeing before meetings or when discussing deadlines, or you can share with others what you did this week to work on your own wellbeing.
  - Let your employees know that bringing up their own wellbeing concerns is always welcomed and encouraged.
  - Set aside time to have a conversation with each of your employees about their wellbeing using the following techniques:
    - Schedule the meeting in a private place.
    - If an employee mentions they are struggling, avoid assumptions.
    - Listen attentively with appropriate eye contact.
    - Ask each employee what they need and come to a solution together.
    - Set future time aside for follow up with each employee to evaluate the effectiveness of the solution, and change track if necessary.

- 2. Model wellbeing** to your employees through your actions. It’s important not only to communicate your intent but also to align your words with your actions. Here are some steps you can take to be a strong model of wellbeing.
  - Promote and attend wellbeing activities within your organization.
  - Make a personal change such as bringing healthy lunches or scheduling walk breaks.
  - Share helpful tips about improving wellbeing with your employees.
  - Avoid sending emails and expecting replies outside office hours.
- 3. Provide opportunities** for wellbeing by being flexible with your timelines and schedule when appropriate.
- 4. Remove roadblocks** to wellbeing such as tight deadlines and heavy workload when possible.
- 5. Recognize employees** for improving their own wellbeing by celebrating their success stories or taking the time to note when others make a healthy change.
- 6. Provide resources** to employees such as webinars or articles that will help them learn about and improve their own wellbeing.





“The secret to success is good leadership, and good leadership is all about making the lives of your team members or workers better.”

— Tony Dungy, NFL Head Coach

## LEADERSHIP: THE KEY TO EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Leaders have a major influence on their organizational culture, which places them in the best position to positively impact employee wellbeing. When an organization is able to move the needle on employee wellbeing, they will see positive impacts on important outcomes like job satisfaction and turnover.



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