Growing a wellbeing movement at work

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How well do we know the wellbeing of our employees and our workmates? It's a tough question to answer but it is one that is becoming more common within organisations. A 2021 workplace wellbeing survey across 600 organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand found 84% of workplaces agreed staff wellbeing initiatives contributed to the retention of high-performing employees (Employers & Manufacturers Association, 2021). The body of evidence is growing in New Zealand, demonstrating the value and return positive wellbeing can have for organisations (Metzger, 2019).
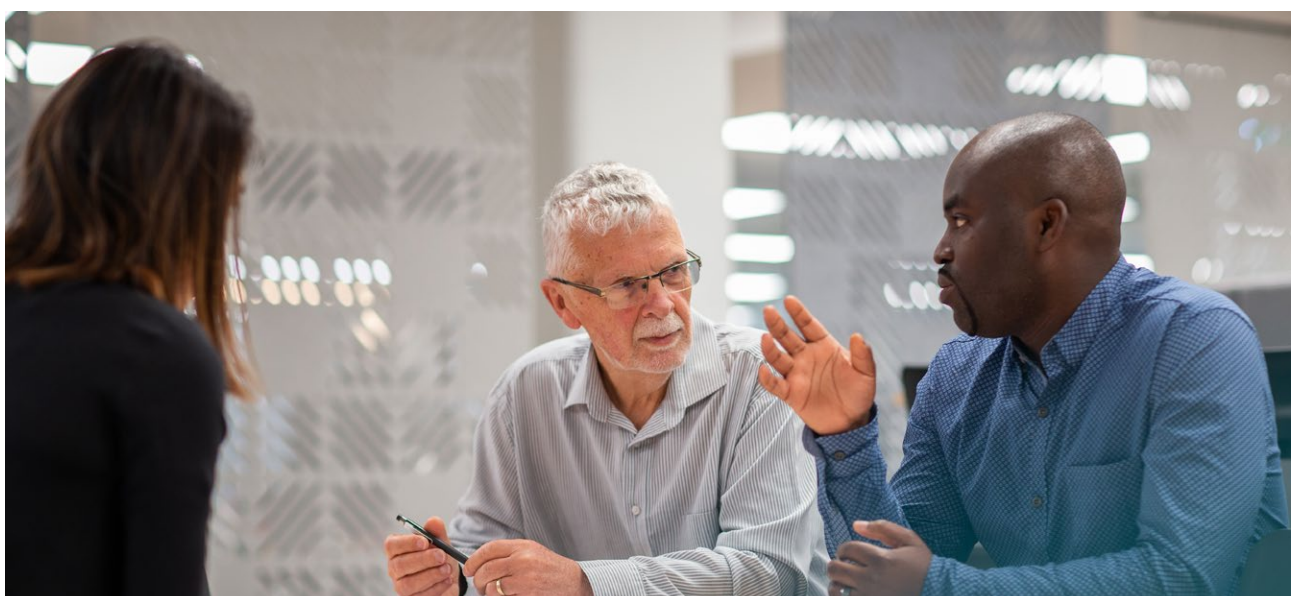
There has been significant research to demonstrate that good engagement practices (workers – managers – business leaders) lead to better wellbeing and productivity outcomes in workplaces (Metzger, 2019). Unfortunately, relatively few business leaders lead engagement with their employees, rather they may contract external consultants to lead this activity. This may be because many individuals in leadership positions are uncertain about how to lead such engagement. Carasco-Saul, Kim and Kim (2015) identified *transformational leadership* as the most successful form of leadership for positive employee-engagement outcomes in comparison to other leadership styles. Transformational leaders are influential, inspirationally motivational, intellectually stimulating, and considerate of individual followers (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

So, do you know what kind of leader you are? If not, go and find out. If you call yourself a leader then we encourage you to remember one thing from this chapter: the way you engage with your colleagues and employees matters. It matters every day you walk through the front door of the office or join a virtual meeting.

Building a movement, such as building a shared focus on wellbeing, relies heavily on how engagement is managed, and this chapter will unpack five ways to influence leaders and navigate resistance and hopefully convert the naysayers into wellbeing champions. These five ways are:

1. Careful use of data and evidence to illustrate the impact wellbeing can have on the bottom line of an organisation

2. Leveraging champions into your conversations with decision-makers

3. Growing connection between people through cultural and place-based activities

4. Deeply understanding employee voice and their wellbeing aspirations

5. Creating consistent feedback loops to show progressive wins to everyone in your organisation

All these things help create conditions for a wellbeing movement to start and to grow. The case studies introduced in this chapter are informed through real-world practice with thought leaders, what they are implementing in their workplace, their insights, breakthroughs and failures to grow a culture of wellbeing within organisations. The first and most important lesson here is you don't have to be in a position of power to start a wellbeing movement within your workplace or industry, you just need to start a conversation.

There is an art to starting these types of conversations and you get better at it over time, but first let's consider the word 'movement'. What do we mean by this? In the history of work, we've seen many movements. They usually start with one passionate voice in the room but can quickly grow into an entire workforce calling for change related to diversity and inclusion, gender pay equity, or greater corporate social responsibility. These are all relevant movements within 'work'. All these movements are intrinsically linked to employee wellbeing. At this time of writing, we are still in a global pandemic. This has given the workplace wellbeing movement an Overton Window, a time when things can feel politically acceptable to the mainstream population. Wellbeing is front and centre for all leaders. Things like flexible working and virtual meetings have become normalised and made life easier for many people, especially mums and dads and those caring for others. But regardless of the benefits many have felt during these strange times, have business leaders realised that the economic wellbeing of their organisations is linked with the wellbeing of their people? Often leaders will say they struggle to understand how wellbeing impacts their bottom line. In response, the key message to those leaders is – when you lead with wellbeing, you create intergenerational health and wealth for your company and your people.

Case study: Rosebank Business Improvement District (Rosebank BID)

In March 2020 right before New Zealand went into a COVID-19 related lockdown, Healthy Families Waitākere, the Rosebank Business Association alongside Business Lab partnered to grow workplace wellbeing within the Rosebank Business Improvement District in West Auckland. In the first week of lockdown, we saw leaders scramble to use technology they had never used before, we saw leaders struggle with the potential impact of lockdown, and we saw leaders genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of their employees. The thought of letting go of staff was mentally and emotionally challenging for them. Leaders shared these feelings in a virtual forum with other leaders who felt the same. They were in the unknown together and being in the unknown together felt better than being in the unknown alone.

1. Careful use of data and evidence

In 2018, before the Rosebank initiative, we were invited to a board meeting of a medium-size organisation to demonstrate the value employee wellbeing can make to their business performance. We shared some data and insights on the return on investment of wellbeing for organisations. For instance, one meta-evaluation (Chapman, 2012) looking at the economic return of worksite health promotion programs found on average programs:

- decrease sick leave absenteeism by 25.3%

- decrease workers' compensation costs by 40.7%

- decrease disability management costs by 24.2%

- save $5.81 for every $1 invested in employee health and wellbeing.

We failed in that meeting but learned that not all leaders understood wellbeing or had a shared definition for it. We were naïve to think that all board members are thought leaders and would already be aware of the benefits of wellbeing. One board member described wellbeing as a 'minefield' while another felt the government was shifting responsibility onto businesses. We walked away having learned there are different leadership mindsets to wellbeing and presenting just the benefits of wellbeing is not enough. In that meeting we found three recognisable types of leadership mindsets:

- Leaders who are champions for wellbeing

- Leaders who are sceptical about wellbeing

- Leaders who resist wellbeing

Knowing this helps when trying to influence how leaders think. Carefully using data and insights and noticing how leaders respond can help reveal leadership mindsets towards wellbeing. It doesn't help if everyone thinks the same at a leadership level. Diversity of experience and world views all matter – it can either support or hinder your wellbeing movement. Being adaptive early on in your engagement style can help create the pre-conditions for a trusting relationship with leadership.

Many times, we approach "why we should invest in workplace wellbeing" with some issue in mind, for example, the construction industry in Aotearoa New Zealand experiences the highest number of suicides among vocational industries. So, the goal becomes to reduce suicides. A national study on health and wellbeing in the construction industry found that builders were overrepresented in industry suicide at 21.7% and that depression is the leading risk factor for this (Bryson, Doblas, Stachowski, & Walmsley, 2019). Our engagement in presenting data and insights to leaders has found that it can quickly create narratives about a workplace or industry in a negative way and this will more often switch leadership off from meaningful engagement.

"Are problems like substance use and depression actually the responsibility of workplaces to address – they seem like big problems and beyond my control?" said a leader of a construction firm, a valid opinion we thought. Data and insights can feed fear or feed aspiration. How you present data and insights matters and should be strengths-based.

At this point, we realised the conversation about workplace wellbeing with business leaders had to shift from focusing on big issues such as substance use and depression to things leaders have control over such as company values and culture, job design and workforce development. This resulted in the innovation team reframing the conversation into how might industry values, job design and workforce development support employee wellbeing?

Reframing is a simple exercise you can apply to shift the dialogue with leaders from a deficit or fixed perspective towards growth and openness. One way to do this is to create 'How might we ...?' statements like the one above. The trick is to keep it practical and relevant to an insight or observation about an issue or challenge.

2. Leveraging champions

Coming into the Rosebank BID one of the first things the innovation team did was identify a wellbeing champion in the business community. We weren't going to make the same mistake twice, so being intentional about our approach was crucial. We found one board member at the Rosebank Business Association who was passionate about community development, so we brought them into a conversation about the innovation project. Together we created a pitch and led engagement with the other board members.

Influencing leaders can be very challenging, even using the right language, alongside relevant data and insights sometimes is not enough. What is most effective is finding leaders who are wellbeing champions and getting them around the table with those who are sceptical or uncomfortable with the topic. Having champions who can share their lived experience about why a wellbeing initiative is important and valuable convinced other leaders and shareholders to give wellbeing a chance in Rosebank.

Our work in several areas such as health, local governance and community development has found using champions as an effective influencing strategy where leadership is on the fence about moving forward with wellbeing. There are several reasons for this. Some leaders assume they will have more work or feel wellbeing will cost more money to implement. This is when data and insights about what is true are important to present. Leading coaches on leadership highlight that the most significant factor driving a successful wellbeing initiative is leadership belief and not just buy-in. Leaders must believe wellbeing is the right thing to do for their organisations.

- **Buy-in**: Buy-in is getting others to agree with an idea or concept, so they will support the idea and implement the necessary goals and actions. When a person is trying to buy in to something new, they may say, "I would buy in to the idea if I knew for sure it would ..."

- **Belief**: Does not require proof. A person can choose to believe in an idea or principle without proof or even despite proof that shows their belief could be wrong.

3. Growing connections

Returning to the Rosebank BID case study, the innovation team were challenged from the very start by some leaders who wanted certainty around business outcomes from the innovation process. It was also a situation where values did not align at the start. So how do you collaborate with someone when core values do not align? We were intentional about building a relationship with leaders in a culturally centred way and used tikanga-based approaches as part of the engagement process. Stakeholders were guided by whakawhānaungatanga, a process for building relationships and identifying common attributes between people. This was a critical success factor for growing a trusting environment between workers and leaders who would ultimately lead the initiative. Whakawhānaungatanga was not a time-limited event but embedded within the entire three-month innovation process. A generous amount of time is required to form trusting relationships especially when heading into a new venture. Below are some tips about what to prioritise in the early days of starting a wellbeing conversation at work.

- Lead by example – people holding the space can demonstrate this by sharing their pepeha, a way of introducing yourself in te reo Māori. It tells people who you are by sharing your connections with the people and places that are important to you.

- Create opportunities for engagement – in workshops we planned ice breakers to start conversations focused on personal values and ways of being. For example, what does a good day at work look like? What makes you happy at work?

- Be consistent – dedicating 10 minutes before every session to building a relationship is more fruitful than a longer one-time event at the start of any workshop series.

Our engagement with the business leaders found when leaders think of wellbeing, they tend to default to ideas such as counselling, health checks and physical activity initiatives. We dived deeper to understand why leaders placed importance on these ideas and found they were seen as 'door openers', 'knowledge sharing' and 'connection building' opportunities for the business community and workers. All of which were seen as pre-conditions for growing leadership belief in the Rosebank Wellbeing Initiative among other staff and business leaders.

Building a strong connection was vital for ongoing discussions on how we shift from addressing the symptoms of stress at work to their root causes. A question that was explored numerous times with business leaders was one that led to commuting and traffic congestion being identified as one of the top stressors for workers in Rosebank. The Rosebank Business Association then mobilised to undertake an impact assessment of traffic congestion on employee wellbeing through a series of drop-in sessions with workplaces and continue to engage their political leaders to find a long-term solution. Some workplaces have created flexible working policies to support staff to work from home, while others have changed start and finish times to minimise stress caused by traffic congestion. It is a complex problem that will take a whole community approach to solve.

In contrast, a regional council in 2011 made a substantial financial investment in programmes to support employee wellbeing. Departments and teams got a slice of the pie, a wide range of activities were funded from social gatherings and physical activity initiatives to awards. Wellbeing surveys were completed every quarter and after a year of implementation, the programme evaluators noticed little or no change in employee performance, employee retention, or an increase in job satisfaction. The funding was discontinued the following year. What went wrong? A couple of things actually. Leaders at the top didn't meaningfully engage staff on ways to support their wellbeing and as a result, solutions created were top-down and did not address real areas of need. The core team lacked representation from across the business unit and struggled to effectively reach into different departments, and no one bothered to truly clarify what success should look like. Not being intentional about engagement can burn social capital (friendship, trust, loyalty, respect) between employees and management and lead to a vicious cycle of employee disengagement.

4. Understanding the employee voice

Qualitative lived experience data is the information gathered about how people experience the world around them. It is data that is deep and rich in stories and is generally collected through interviews or group discussions. The important thing is this approach can help amplify the voices of those who might be most affected by a particular problem. In 2018 a group of workplaces from South Auckland agreed to explore the wellbeing of shift workers (Alliance Community Initiatives Trust, 2018). The innovation team used an empathy-led approach (Mattelmäki, Vaajakallio, & Koskinen, 2014) to engage employees from five different workplaces over a two-week period. There were three critical success factors for getting rich information from employees. These were management support, the space, and types of questions.

- **Management support.** Ensuring middle managers were invited by their leadership to provide ideas on the best ways to engage their teams was crucial for ongoing support and understanding of any resistance the innovation team could face. Inviting team leaders to co-host helps build trust in this process.

- **Provision of space.** Curating the space for the conversation was really important with plenty of messaging within the workplace to ensure employees were aware ahead of time – for example, posters and emails. Spaces that worked well for the engagement were the kitchen cafeteria, shop floor, and greenspace outside, in comparison to board and meeting rooms and machine-operating areas.

- **Question type.** A list of 1–3 well-refined open-ended questions proved to be far better than 5–10 questions or an online survey. Questions needed to be conversation starters rather than try to unpack a technical aspect of the job. Examples of questions that worked:

    - What does a good day at work look like?

    - What three things do we need to improve to make work more meaningful?

These are just some critical success factors to consider – they help to build psychological safety. Psychological safety describes an organisational or team climate in which people are comfortable being and expressing themselves (Edmondson, 1999). A recent McKinsey Global Survey found only 26% of leaders instil a climate of psychological safety (De Sment, 2021). When there is psychological safety, team members feel they can take interpersonal risks without fear of embarrassment, rejection, negative labelling or punishment. Understanding the level of psychological safety at your workplace is important before you can effectively address wellbeing. Innovation research shows employees are less likely to share openly about the causes of stress if they, (a) do not trust the engagement process, and (b) do not feel trust or feel safe at work (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). There is no easy way to assess the level of psychological safety at a workplace, so it's best to assume from the very start that not everyone at your workplace experiences the same level of psychological safety. In this situation, doing the above and undertaking this safety check might further grow psychological safety.

Safety check for yourself and your team:

- When did you last reflect on your team values?

- When did you last talk about failures and what you learnt from those experiences?

- When did you last hear about a concern at work?

If it's been a while, then perhaps look at the original Psychological Safety Scale (PSS) by Edmondson (1999).

5. Importance of progressive wins

Progressive wins help build continuity of engagement, providing essential nutrients for trust to grow between leaders and the implementation team, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship. What are progressive wins? These are wins along the way that help you achieve your big goal. Progressive wins can be achieved as a result of important insights gained through failure, the development of new relationships and even new ideas. In Rosebank, we heard leaders often asking about what's not working and what did we learn? Here is a quick framing tool you can apply in your next conversation with peers and leaders.

1. We tried (name activity) and (describe event) happened. What we learned was (____). As a result I/we decided to (action).

2. We set out to (name activity) and as a result, something unexpected happened (Describe what happened). Now we have a breakthrough for (name action/decision).

3. Our current challenge is (name it). I think we can solve it with leadership support and that would be a significant win for the initiative.

Action can create excitement and every movement needs excitement (enthusiasm, buy-in, belief) to grow. In the Rosebank BID case study, leaders told us that they needed to get some 'runs on the board', they needed to create 'FOMO' the fear of missing out on the wellbeing wave, and that people in their business community like to see action. From an innovation viewpoint, we wanted any action to be informed by workers in the community; however, reaching workers during the peak of COVID-19 was a formidable challenge, so we ran with insights shared by business leaders and worked hard to engage with workers along the way. This approach meant leaders felt their ideas were heard. One insight that stood out was how many leaders felt a lack of connection and relationship to other businesses in the local community, and lack of connection with other business leaders which led to silo-entrepreneurship and prevented help-seeking behaviour from leaders.

This was a notable experience and opportunity area to explore further so we framed this up as a design question. How might we grow connections in new ways between workplaces in the business community? We generated 15 ideas across five themes and prioritised them based on practicality – how easily can we get this action started? We framed this as 'activations' with the strategic intent to help businesses and workers connect with the tangible aspects of wellbeing (knowledge sharing and connection building).

We tested three ideas with business leaders to understand the critical shifts required to normalise staff participation in wellbeing activities 'during paid work hours'. Our first test invited workplaces to join in a community volunteering experience for two hours. We engaged 20 businesses and only one agreed to participate. The remaining organisations could not justify letting staff go off-site due to COVID-19 and the backlog of tasks. The second activation tested the idea of free health checks for staff during paid work time. This idea was popular. The third activation tested if businesses would engage in a play-based business challenge. This activation engaged 163 workers across 23 workplaces in the business community. Our key reflection on the processes reported here is that consistent engagement pays off – people notice and engage. As a result, we have business leaders wanting to learn more about the Rosebank wellbeing initiative. Activations such as the above help create excitement and connect people with something they can feel, touch and experience. Activations build and demonstrate credibility in front of peers and leaders. Over time it helps create a shift in narratives about a place. In Rosebank, the narrative is shifting from a place for business success to a place for business, people and community success.

Share your progressive wins with passion and excitement and ensure you clearly explain what these little wins mean for the initiative. Being able to articulate small wins on a regular basis keeps leaders informed and confident about the process especially when they feel outcomes are not clear from the start. In Rosebank, we experienced many little wins such as launching the first community-wide survey on wellbeing, presenting to local boards gaining their support, and publishing success stories which all helped to grow the wellbeing movement. Our consistent communication about these progressive wins to the Rosebank Business Association governance board, alongside feedback they heard from workers and leaders in the business community, led to a breakthrough that we did not expect during the height of COVID-19.

The board agreed to include wellbeing as a strategic priority in their annual plan and long-term strategy and allocated funding towards it. This has given the initiative an opportunity to grow, creating a shared sense of achievement across all partners, business leaders and workers. But the story doesn't end here for Rosebank. The foundations for the wellbeing movement to grow are in place and it's only a matter of time until wellbeing becomes business as usual.

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