



Building an Inclusive Culture of Well-being at Work

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“Does your organization still separate out issues of wellness, gender equality and diversity and inclusion? We can no longer afford to silo these issues.”

I have been thinking a lot about what well-being looks like for different people, in their places of work. I work in gender equality and inclusion in workplaces which I believe is fundamentally about well-being.

We are currently facing a series of global pandemics: physical health, mental health, anti-black racism, gender-based violence, domestic violence, which is on the rise during COVID. I believe our global crises are walking us up to the impacts of inequality and exclusion on well-being, and now is the time for us to see these links, and how they play out, including in our workplaces.

For the purposes of this article, I offer as a start, a working definition of well-being. I like [Ashoka Changemakers Learning Lab \(Report: Social Entrepreneurial Pathways to a Culture of Wellbeing\)](#) definition: “Well being is a dynamic balance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development in relation to self, community and society. It includes, beyond fulfillment of basic needs, a sense of value and purpose, and being part of a society that validates and respects one’s identity...” . And the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO, 1948).

This pushed my reflection on well-being at work as it is connected to identity and exclusion. The well-being of women-identified folks, LGBTQ+, women with disabilities, young workers, black workers, and all workers of colour will be disproportionately affected by insecure working conditions.

Here are 5 talking points for building a more inclusive culture of well-being in your workplaces.

These are my work in progress reflections; I invite you to build on these.

1. Bring together your conversations around gender equality, D & I, HR, and wellness

Does your organization still separate out issues of wellness, gender equality and diversity and inclusion? If so, start with looking at the teams and issues, and where they overlap, or are siloed. We can no longer afford to silo these issues.

How can these teams start working together and building knowledge to better understand the impacts of exclusion on well-being? In Canada, we have a set of guidelines, tools, and resources to guide organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work. This is ground-breaking, but when it comes to implementation, some workplaces separate this from their initiatives around gender equality or D & I. And some organizations do mental health training that is separated from their work on D & I. Let us use this time to make more intentional links.

2. Holistic, racially and gender diverse employee assistance

If you have an Employee Assistance Program, do you have mental health practitioners that are culturally, racially and gender diverse? Do you have practitioners that specialize in domestic and gender-based violence (which has increased during COVID)?

As noted by Karlyn Percil in her article: [5 Equity-based Strategies to get you Started on Making Black Lives Matter in the Workplace. A Guide for White Leaders and Employees:](#)

Having someone who looks like you eases that burden of emotional tax and gives an immediate sense of being seen and heard. Ensure that there are racially and culturally diverse wellness practitioners in your Employee Assistance Program offerings to increase relatability.

Also see [this Catalyst research series](#) on the emotional tax levied on Asian, Black, Latinx, and multiracial employees.

On this topic, where could your health insurance coverage be more inclusive? For example, fertility treatments, screening for breast/cervical cancer accessible to all genders, etc. see: this [Mercer/Marsh & McLennan article on inclusive health care benefits by Diego Ramírez & Kavitha Hariharan](#). Draw on focus groups and Employee Resource Groups to discuss what is missing, see this [Manulife article](#). In some recent work with a client, a company found that creating safe spaces for women to discuss anonymously allowed them to identify gaps in health insurance coverage for women.

3. Build a culture where emotions are honoured

Where we operate in environments that subtly or not so subtly downplay showing emotion, we compound issues. We cut off a part of our humanity when we cut off feelings, and I too must remind myself of this when I struggle to allow emotion out. I am also reminded that it is a privilege to intellectualize and ignore feelings in our workplaces (see [Karlyn Percil's article](#) for a quote by Leesa Renee Hall on what she terms the "intellectualization of racism)."

How do we start building a workplace culture where it is safe for all of us to feel?

For a start, encourage leaders to do wellness checks with teams to de-stigmatize talking about feelings. It can start with check ins, using colours for example, or other creative ways to check in. I have tried different approaches; see what works for where your team is at, and the kinds of conversations you need to have. Creative check ins can make it easier to open conversations around feelings than the simple "how are you today?" We also must remember to make room for righteous anger and other "negative" emotions as we take deep breaths and share and hear about the impacts of discrimination.

4. Create positive, healing language around well-being

When I say positive, I do not mean the "suck it up and smile" positivity, which can invalidate. I mean that we can start to focus on healing, rather than sickness. We can start to focus on what people need to feel well, rather than on what is wrong with them, see [Ashoka Changemakers Learning Lab \(Report: Social Entrepreneurial Pathways to a Culture of Wellbeing\)](#). We can start to focus on the social circumstances, as well as the workplace culture that can lead to un-wellness in individuals, rather than pathologize them. As a woman-identified lawyer and leader, I have been empowered to know that my challenges were part of a social context of how women, and women in leadership roles are often expected to behave.

5. Encourage and model care as a priority

Start by asking these questions:

- Is self-care an issue addressed in your organizations, groups, or workplaces?
- Is self-care seen as something "unproductive?"
- Do you, as a leader find it difficult to think of yourself as a person who deserves care?

(**the above questions are inspired from: [Mujeres Al Borde's Manual "Self-Care and Feminist Healing for Unmanageable"](#) as adapted for the Institute for War & Peace Reporting resource "[Cyberwomen: Holistic Digital Security Training Curriculum for Women Human Rights Defenders](#), see also [Level UP website](#)**)

I believe we have the chance to re-imagine workplaces right now and build healthier ones for everyone. Let's do it. We can be better; we can be great.

This article offers reflections based on my experience, working internationally, and living in Canada. I hope this brings together folks who work in HR, workplace mental health, wellness, gender equality and D & I into a joint conversation. I invite you to comment and add your thoughts.

What have you put into practice in your workplace? What worked and did not?

I want to give a shout out to the people and organizations below, who are bringing important ideas to the world and have been recent sources of inspiration. Check out their work:

[Japji Anna Bass, Flourish Wellbeing](#) – has first and foremost inspired deeper reflection on inclusive well-being

[Ashoka Changemakers Learning Lab](#)

[Karlyn Percil KDPM Consulting Group](#)

[Sherna Alexander Benjamin](#) also see: [The Center for Building Resilient Communities](#)

[adrienne maree brown - Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute](#)

Until I see you all again, take care of yourselves, and each other.

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