

REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY PART 6 -- WELLBEING

Well-being is the cornerstone of managing workplace stress and anxiety. When it's neglected, a vicious cycle emerges: stress leads to anxiety, anxiety depletes well-being, and poor well-being further amplifies stress. Left unchecked, this spiral can lead to burnout, affecting not only professional performance but also physical, mental, and emotional health. I've experienced this firsthand, and my story is a testament to how damaging this downward spiral can be, and how intentional changes can break it.

During my final years at Maersk, I was under immense stress. The company was restructuring, my role was increasingly unclear, and I had a tense relationship with a colleague. Every day felt uncertain, and I carried that unease with me constantly. At the same time, I was neglecting my physical health. I stress-eat constantly, stopped exercising, and felt more exhausted each day. My mental and emotional health also suffered. Long hours, constant travel, and late meetings left me drained, and I wasn't showing up for my family the way I wanted to. While I wasn't entirely absent, I wasn't fully present either.

The cycle continued for over a year and a half, slowly eroding my well-being. It wasn't until conversations with my wife helped me realize how unsustainable my life had become that I began making changes. These moments of reflection became a turning point.

When an opportunity arose to join another company, I took it as a chance to reset. The office setup encouraged active commuting, and I began biking and even running, several times a week. I adopted healthier eating habits, lost weight, and regained energy. Beyond the physical changes, I set boundaries and prioritized time with my family, becoming more present as a father and husband.

These intentional shifts transformed my well-being and brought my life back into alignment with my values. I share this not to suggest that everyone needs to leave their job to improve their well-being, but to emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing the cycle of stress, anxiety, and neglect before it becomes overwhelming.

Breaking the downward spiral of poor well-being doesn't require a complete life overhaul. It starts with small, conscious decisions to prioritize well-being across all areas (physical, mental, emotional, and social). By recognizing the patterns and making intentional changes, we can take the first steps toward healthier, more fulfilling lives.

Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we're not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We're talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them – especially right now. It's the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn't come from nowhere. It's not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it's the result of deeper, systemic issues. These are things that exist across teams and organizations and are baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we're exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety**. These are the themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren't just theoretical problems. They're patterns I've seen in action, and, in many cases, lived through myself.

Here's what we'll be digging into over the coming months:

1. **Toxic Work Environments** - when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.
2. **Imposter Syndrome** - when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.
3. **Lack of Supportive Relationships** - when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.



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4. **Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** - when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.
5. **Neglected Well-Being** - when people are burning out, and no one's paying attention to the toll.
6. **Resistance to Change** - when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.
7. **Personal and Global Stressors** - when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.

Each article in this series will explore one of these drivers in depth, offering real stories, research-backed insight, and practical tools to help reduce anxiety. Whether you're leading a team or just trying to get through the week with your sanity intact, these articles will help reduce anxiety in the workplace

As you read in the intro, this month's article focuses on the importance of wellbeing, and how anxiety can stem from a lack of wellbeing. Let's dive in.

The Dimensions of Well-Being and its Connection to Workplace Anxiety

Well-being isn't a single concept. It's multidimensional, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects that together create the foundation for a healthy, balanced life. Neglect in one area often ripples through the others, leading to stress, anxiety, and reduced resilience. By understanding these dimensions, we can take deliberate actions to improve them and create environments where individuals and teams can thrive.

Physical Well-Being

Physical health is often the most tangible aspect of well-being, yet it's also one of the easiest to overlook under stress. Poor sleep, lack of exercise, and unhealthy eating habits can all exacerbate anxiety and reduce productivity. Research shows that regular physical activity decreases cortisol (the stress hormone) and boosts endorphins, improving mood and energy levels.

In my own experience, neglecting physical well-being was a major factor in my downward spiral. Long commutes, desk-bound days, and stress eating left me exhausted and disengaged. It wasn't until I prioritized physical health, through active commuting, better nutrition, and regular exercise, that I saw improvements in my mood, energy, and resilience.

Leaders can support physical well-being by encouraging flexibility in schedules, offering resources for fitness and nutrition, and modeling healthy habits themselves. Small changes, like taking walking meetings or promoting breaks, can create a ripple effect that benefits both individuals and the organization.

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Mental and emotional health are closely tied to workplace stress. Anxiety and burnout are common, with 76% of U.S. workers reporting that stress affects their productivity. Practices like mindfulness and reflection can help individuals manage stress and regulate emotions.

During my most stressful times, I failed to reflect on my mental state or seek support. It wasn't until my wife helped me realize the toll my lifestyle was taking that I began addressing it. Leaders play a critical role in fostering mental well-being by promoting psychological safety, offering mental health resources, and encouraging open conversations.

Social Well-Being

The quality of our relationships has a profound impact on our overall well-being. Strong social connections reduce stress, improve emotional health, and even boost physical health. In the workplace, social well-being is about creating a culture of trust, collaboration, and respect.



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I've seen the power of supportive relationships during challenging times in my career. Peers and mentors helped me regain confidence and focus, even when I felt disconnected. Leaders can enhance social well-being by addressing toxic dynamics, encouraging team cohesion, and respecting personal boundaries.

Breaking the Cycle of Poor Well-Being

When well-being is neglected, it often creates a cycle: stress leads to poor habits, poor habits worsen anxiety, and anxiety feeds back into stress. Breaking this cycle requires intentional effort and action across the dimensions of well-being—physical, mental, and social. Here's how leaders and individuals can intervene to stop the spiral and create positive momentum.

1. Recognizing the Patterns - The first step in breaking the cycle is recognizing the signs of poor well-being in yourself or others. These may include:

- Persistent exhaustion or low energy levels
- Increased irritability, distraction, or disengagement
- Physical symptoms like headaches, insomnia, or stress eating
- Withdrawal from relationships or avoidance of social interactions

Leaders should observe these behaviors without judgment and approach them with empathy. A simple, open-ended question like "How are you feeling?" can be a powerful way to start a conversation.

2. Prioritizing Physical Health - Small, manageable changes to physical health can make a big difference. Leaders can support this by:

- Encouraging flexibility to allow for exercise or rest
- Offering resources, like ergonomic workspaces or fitness initiatives
- Modeling healthy behaviors themselves, such as taking breaks or prioritizing sleep

On a personal level, simple habits like walking meetings, better nutrition, or short mindfulness exercises can reduce stress and restore energy. During my reset at Unity, running and biking became transformative for my physical and mental health, helping me regain control over my well-being.

3. Strengthening Social Connections - Social well-being is often overlooked, but strong relationships can provide vital support during times of stress. Leaders can promote connection by:

- Addressing toxic dynamics or interpersonal conflicts within teams
- Facilitating activities that build trust and camaraderie, like team-building workshops or informal gatherings
- Respecting employees' boundaries and encouraging balance between work and personal relationships

For individuals, maintaining social connections outside of work, whether through family, friends, or community groups, can provide a buffer against workplace stress.

The Role of Leaders in Promoting Well-Being

As a leader, you have a unique role in shaping the well-being of your team. While you can't control every aspect of their lives, you can create an environment that prioritizes health, fosters trust, and supports resilience. Here are the keyways leaders can champion well-being in the workplace:

1. Model Healthy Behaviors - Leaders set the tone for their teams. If you're sending emails at midnight, skipping breaks, or regularly overworking, your team may feel pressured to do the same. Instead, lead by example:

- Take regular breaks and encourage your team to do the same
- Share how you prioritize your physical and mental health, such as through exercise or mindfulness practices
- Set boundaries, like disconnecting after work hours, to signal that balance is valued



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When employees see their leaders prioritizing well-being, it gives them permission to do so too.

2. Foster a Culture of Openness - Well-being often deteriorates in environments where employees feel they can't speak up about challenges. Creating a culture of openness and psychological safety ensures your team feels supported. Practical steps include:

- Regular check-ins to ask how team members are doing—not just about work but holistically
- Active listening during conversations, showing empathy and understanding
- Encouraging employees to share their feedback and ideas without fear of judgment

3. Provide Resources and Support - Organizations that invest in well-being resources demonstrate that they value their employees' health. These can include:

- Access to mental health resources, such as counseling or employee assistance programs
- Flexible schedules to accommodate personal and family needs
- Programs to support physical health, like subsidized gym memberships or wellness challenges

Even small changes, like introducing mindfulness workshops or promoting fitness breaks, can make a big difference.

4. Address Workplace Stressors - Leaders need to actively identify and address sources of stress within the workplace, such as unclear priorities, overwhelming workloads, or interpersonal conflicts. Here's how:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities to reduce confusion and prevent overload
- Work with employees to set realistic goals and timelines
- Address toxic dynamics directly and ensure a culture of respect and collaboration

5. Encourage Balance - A healthy work-life balance is critical to well-being. Respect employees' time outside of work and encourage them to disconnect. If possible, provide flexibility for personal commitments or caregiving responsibilities. By showing that you value balance, you help employees feel more in control and less overwhelmed.

Building a Workplace Where Well-Being Thrives

Well-being isn't just a personal responsibility. It's a collective effort. When individuals, leaders, and organizations prioritize physical, mental, and social health, they create environments where anxiety is reduced, resilience is strengthened, and teams can thrive.

For me, the journey to improved well-being wasn't easy. It took a turning point and some honest conversations to realize how unsustainable my habits had become. But it also showed me the power of small, intentional changes. From running to work to setting boundaries, each step brought me closer to balance and alignment with my values.

As leaders, we have the opportunity to create these moments of change for our teams. By modeling healthy behaviors, fostering openness, and providing resources, we can help individuals break the cycle of stress and anxiety before it becomes burnt out. It's about creating workplaces where well-being isn't an afterthought, but a priority embedded into the culture.

This isn't just about avoiding burnout or reducing absenteeism. When we invest in well-being, we unlock the potential for greater creativity, collaboration, and innovation. Healthy, engaged teams are the foundation of any successful organization.

The steps may seem small (encouraging flexibility, promoting mindfulness, building stronger relationships) but their impact is profound. Together, we can create workplaces that don't just function but flourish, where well-being is a shared priority and everyone is empowered to bring their best selves to work.

Let's build a culture of care, one decision at a time.