Strengthening Organizational Well-Being With
MICROPRACTICES

By Mei-Li Lin and Rosa Antonia Carrillo

ORGANIZATIONS ARE INCREASINGLY AWARE that well-being is essential to achieving and sustaining high organizational performance (Grossmeier & Hudsmith, 2015). Yet, according to a study, while 95% of managers believe they can influence worker happiness, only 19% of organizations have made workforce well-being a strategic priority (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2020).

The safety profession has traditionally focused on risk management and loss control. Success in safety is still mostly measured in reduced physical injuries. Yet, reducing injury and illness does not mean we are creating conditions that prevent the less tangible psychological injuries or that allow people to realize their fullest potential. Often, we hear that the goal is to send people home in the same shape they arrive at work. However, a wealth of data suggests that organizations can achieve much more when leaders attend to the conditions for employee well-being.

In a worldwide study, 115 OSH executives were asked to select the top three attributes that a world-class safety organization must have. All participants selected "Has a culture where people would point out safety issues and behaviors without hesitation" as the top attribute (Lin, 2012). The safety profession has matured and now realizes that this state cannot be attained unless employees feel safe to speak up.

The goal of this article is to nudge leaders to expand the focus of the safety and health function beyond physical hazards into the socioemotional exposures that affect employee and organizational well-being. The motivation is not only to have happier employees and prevent socioemotional injuries, but also to effectively enlist employees as part of the safety defense systems and to achieve greater performance overall. By this, the authors mean

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This article proposes a fundamental shift in how organizations define and approach overall performance improvement by including well-being through micropractices. It recommends that the OSH function add employee well-being to its approach and core purpose.
- The article examines the key components of well-being and their implications, and makes the connection between well-being, safety, health and performance improvement.
- Finally, the article addresses how to make this shift in a sustainable manner. Introducing micropractices provides the tools to actualize well-being for the self and others. Exercised daily, these practices can produce personal transformation and lasting organizational change.

each employee becomes a sensor for drift, hidden risks and weak signals, and is able to sound the alarm when needed.

Finally, the article introduces micropractices as an approach to achieve well-being. Those who are asked to implement change efforts are often expected to take sweeping actions, make behavioral changes or even adopt a new persona. These can be challenged and resisted by those involved and may be one reason why most change efforts fail. It is proposed here that it can be more effective to adopt small changes at the local level and engage employees at a day-to-day micro level to get immediate feedback on which practices generate change momentum. The micropractices will reshape the way most people think about organizational change.

Definitions

Well-being, mental health, and socioemotional connections are intra- and interpersonal processes. They determine a person's ability to contribute and establish positive and rewarding relationships with others. Although used interchangeably at times, each of these terms has a distinct impact on individuals and organizational performance.

Well-Being

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, n.d.):

Workplace well-being relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization. The aim of measures for workplace well-being is to complement OSH measures to make sure workers are safe, healthy, satisfied and engaged at work.

Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018):

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Unfortunately, there is often bias toward mental illness when the term "mental health" is discussed.

Socioemotional Connection

Socioemotional connection relates to our sense of self and our perception of others' reactions to us, including dimensions such as identity, sense of belonging and emotions associated with interactions, such as trust, fear and respect (Delahunty et al., 2014). Workplace studies associate the presence of these connections with reducing stress and raising desire to put in effort above and beyond their duties to support a team or an organization (Rousseau & Parks, 1993).
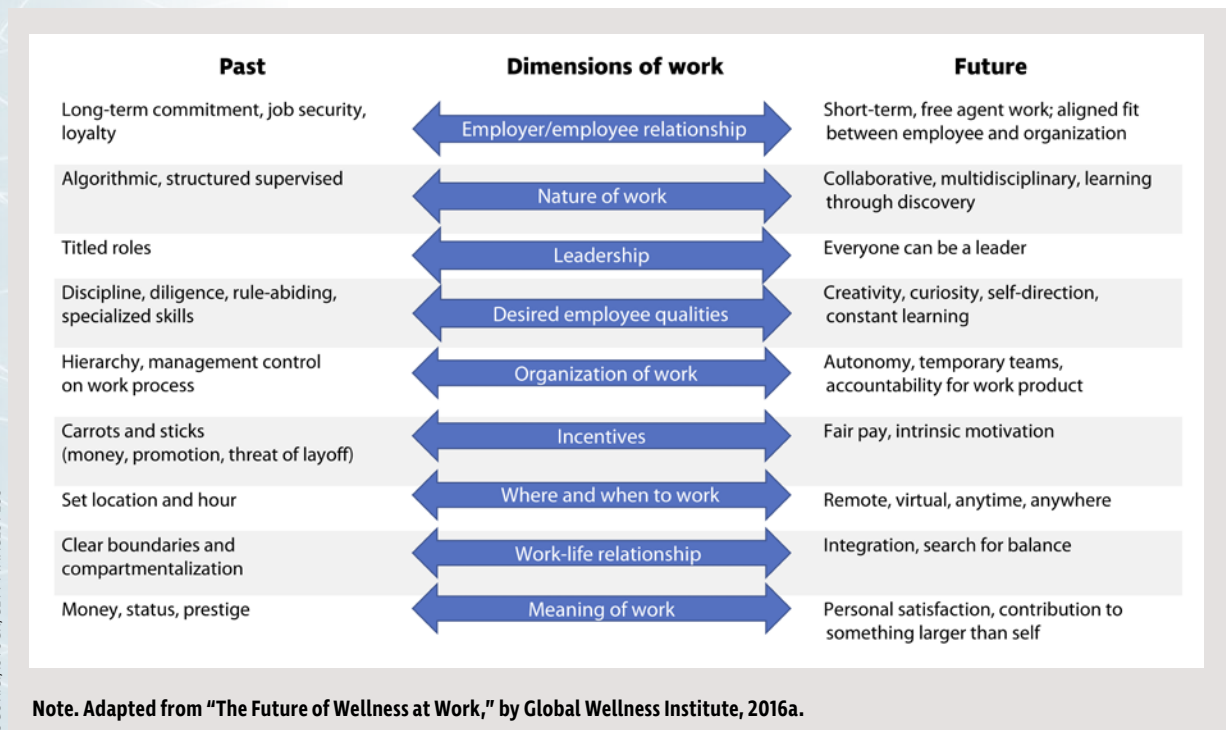
Why Strengthen Well-Being?

While businesses have increased awareness of the impact of well-being on organizational performance, there is hesitancy to take on this massive social challenge (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2020). The following discussion provides some context on how well-being interacts and affects businesses today and in the future.

Financial Benefits of Well-Being

The evidence shows that investing in employee well-being translates into good business and shareholder value. One review on mental health found that for every £1 busi-

FIGURE 1
FUTURE OF WORK

Past	Dimensions of work	Future
Long-term commitment, job security, loyalty	Employer/employee relationship	Short-term, free agent work; aligned fit between employee and organization
Algorithmic, structured supervised	Nature of work	Collaborative, multidisciplinary, learning through discovery
Titled roles	Leadership	Everyone can be a leader
Discipline, diligence, rule-abiding, specialized skills	Desired employee qualities	Creativity, curiosity, self-direction, constant learning
Hierarchy, management control on work process	Organization of work	Autonomy, temporary teams, accountability for work product
Carrots and sticks (money, promotion, threat of layoff)	Incentives	Fair pay, intrinsic motivation
Set location and hour	Where and when to work	Remote, virtual, anytime, anywhere
Clear boundaries and compartmentalization	Work-life relationship	Integration, search for balance
Money, status, prestige	Meaning of work	Personal satisfaction, contribution to something larger than self

Note. Adapted from "The Future of Wellness at Work," by Global Wellness Institute, 2016a.

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nesses invest in mental health training programs, they can see a return of up to £10 (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017). Some of the statistics on the benefits of improved employee well-being are:

- •37% lower absenteeism levels,
- •up to 65% lower employee turnover,
- •21% higher productivity, and
- •22% higher profitability (Amador de San José, 2020; ILO, n.d.).

Well-Being & Talent Potential

Companies invest and compete to recruit talent, yet sometimes fail or are less rigorous in creating the environment to unleash their full potential. Studies indicate that employees who feel they belong are more likely to contribute at the level they are recruited for and to stay with a company (Sheridan, 1992). An important element of realizing talent potential is to emphasize interpersonal relationship and values along with work-task values (Google, n.d.-a).

Well-being enables socioemotional connection, which instills a sense of belonging and enhances learning agility, or the ability to acquire and apply new knowledge. Gibbons (2019) argues that to meet the competition in the digital age, companies should hire based on learning agility instead of hiring based on skill sets. Well-being strengthens this ability because it nurtures intrinsic motivation to learn (Edmondson, 2004).

Preparing for the Future of Work

The Global Wellness Institute (2016b) forecasts work to change radically from information to wisdom economy in the future (see Figure 1; p. 23):

> The most profound shift: the Information Age will be succeeded by "Wisdom" or "Human" Age: . . . qualities not replicable by machines (collaboration . . . empathy . . . etc.) will be in high demand. And these qualities demand the highest level of mental and physical wellness.

The future of work will bring even more uncertainty and ambiguity into the workplace. More than ever, organizations require a skilled workforce fully engaged: mentally healthy, agile and with socioemotional competence (De Meuse et al., 2010). The importance of employee well-being becomes clear when we look at the direction of the future of work. Figure 1 (p. 23) depicts the shifts in the employee expectations, the way work is done and needed organizational skill sets.

Using the Micropractices to Strengthen Organizational Well-Being

Micropractices serve the purpose of initiating managers and safety professionals into becoming catalysts for change. Micropractices are small actions that leaders may selectively and progressively adopt into their daily interactions to deepen social connections and improve the well-being of team members. These micropractices trigger immediate and meaningful social feedback, which is a powerful way to reinforce and turn practices to habits. Fogg (2020) validated this approach with more than 40,000 people in his research.

Each time one gets a positive response from an interaction, it is reinforced and eventually becomes part of one's everyday behavior. A person must be willing to practice even without positive reinforcement because some individuals might be distrustful and require several attempts to connect. For this reason, it is best not to focus on one person but to practice with several or all people with whom we interact.

Leadership is important in organizational change. Typically, leaders are engaged with prescribed roles in the change process and are expected to make behavioral changes or even adopt a new persona. These are often met with resistance from both leaders and associated employees. Instead of developing a sweeping and prescribed program, organizations may engage leaders to cocreate action plans, develop examples of the micropractices and set personalized objectives. This allows time for leaders to exercise the micropractices and gradually transform them into habits. While this approach may seem less structured and lack

TABLE 1

MICROPRACTICES TO PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Practice	Belief instilled
Give thanks and recognition for specific contributions.	I am important and my abilities are recognized.
Help others save face. Avoid blame or criticism in public.	My manager or coworkers have my back. It is safe for me to take risks.
Listen and focus on understanding and learning.	My manager or coworkers are willing to listen to me. I can tell my story.
Ask for feedback, offer to help and follow up.	My manager or coworkers respect my views and can be trusted.
Insist on having dissenting points of view.	I can speak up even if my boss or others might disagree.

TABLE 2

MICROPRACTICES TO PROMOTE AUTHENTICITY

Practice	Belief instilled
Share your stories and emotions at the right moments.	My boss is open to sharing emotions. I can do the same.
Identify your values, speak about them and embody them.	I trust my boss. They stand by their words and principles.
Extend trust (e.g., giving people more autonomy in their roles).	My boss trusts me to do my job.
Sincerely apologize when you make a mistake.	My boss will admit it when they make mistakes. I should do the same.
Communicate your desire to connect personally with team members.	My boss cares about me. They seem genuinely interested in getting to know me.

the unified measurable goals of a traditional program, it respects the differences among leaders. It allows them to own the practices they have chosen, own the feedback they receive and find their ways to adapt. The transformation thus can take place and be sustained.

The micropractices described in the following discussion reinforce three key social dynamics that are present in the research that connects well-being and organizational performance: 1. psychological safety; 2. authenticity; and 3. social identity and belonging. The examples provided center around social interactions, which is how cultures are created and changed. Some of the micropractices are nonverbal such as eye contact. Others are spoken. Conversations are cited the most frequently as the opportunity to influence change (Carrillo, 2020; Schein & Schein, 2018; Shaw, 2002; Stacey et al., 2002). This is when the micropractices can be used most effectively.

Cooper (2010) shows that positive social interaction also contributes to better safety performance. The following discussion offers a deeper look at how these dynamics strengthen the sustainable growth of an organization.

Psychological Safety

As defined by Edmondson (2019), psychological safety involves providing environments in which workers can share ideas, call out concerns, ask critical questions, and make mistakes without fear of being punished or humiliated. It allows workers to perform at their full potential and prevents injury to their mental and emotional well-being. A psychologically safe workplace would be free of excessive fear or chronic anxiety.

Evidence from neuroscience seems to support these views of psychological safety. Any kind of exclusion from a group can trigger the part of the brain that experiences pain. The activities that cause pain the most often are poor social interactions, such as criticism in front of others, bullying or ridicule (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 2003; Rock, 2009). Workplace studies associate the presence of these connections with reducing stress and raising desire to put in effort above and beyond their duties while their absence tends to produce lower performance (Rousseau & Parks, 1993).

Psychological Safety & Team Performance

Via psychological safety, well-being contributes to the level of team performance as well as learning and innovation (Duhigg, 2016; Edmondson, 2004; Newman et al., 2017). In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members, to experiment with ideas and to challenge team assumptions (Google, n.d.-b). Without it, the brain's ability to process information is reduced. Psychological safety is a topic of great interest to the safety and health industry precisely because studies have shown that its presence

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increases the sense that it is safe to ask questions, point out possible mistakes or admit mistakes (Clark, 2020). Table 1 presents day-to-day micropractices that promote psychological safety and the beliefs instilled as a result.

Authenticity

Practicing authenticity is what enables individuals to bring their full selves to work because it engenders well-being and a sense of belonging (Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). It is also what enables relationships that reinforce the positive behaviors that contribute to high performance. Results from an exploratory study conducted by Jensen and Luthans (2006) indicate that authentic leadership serves as the single strongest predictor of an employee's job satisfaction, organizational commitment and workplace happiness.

Being authentic does not mean we interact with everyone in the same way all of the time. The concept of three personas describes an individual's situation-based personality. We behave differently in different situations. There is: 1. the underlying self, innate self; 2. everyday self, how we interact with others; or 3. overextended self, how we behave under stress (Desson et al., 2015). Revealing and connecting with the three personas requires us to be vulnerable and willing to take social risks. Understanding the overextended self allows us to be empathetic, to support and to help prevent risk-prone decisions rather than to judge. The value of authenticity is that it allows us to know each other's three personas making our social connections stronger and deeper.

To be authentic is to take interpersonal risks by facing questions such as "will I be judged or dismissed as incompetent?" or "will I still be accepted by the circles I wish to be a part of?" yet still staying true to one's views and ideas. The micropractices can be designed to synergize the three personas that we each manifest in the workplace. The combination of micropractices and the three personas offer a way to systematically improve self-awareness and to relate to each other under a stressful situation. It may sound simple, yet, as responsibility and cultural diversity increases interactions with others become more complex; consequently, being authentic can be challenging and requires deliberate effort. The bite-size and agile nature of micropractices allows us to create an immediate social connection that resets and eases stressful conditions when necessary. Table 2 presents day-to-day micropractices to promote authenticity and the beliefs instilled through these practices.

Social Identity & Belonging

Scientists speculate that humans are born with a giant circuitry for relation because people depend on others for survival (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eagleman, 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2015). Thus, an unwritten set of social rules shapes our development and influences our decisions on how to behave and how to interpret the actions of others. This determines both our sense of self and the social circles in which we operate (Fine & Manning, 2003).

For this reason, a sense of belonging and a clear social identity are essential to well-being (Suchman, 2006). The social identity we have adopted determines the degree and reliability of an individual's long-term contribution (Clear, 2019; Fogg, 2020). "I am the 'gatekeeper' or 'spokesperson' for our team. I am the one whom my team counts on to win this deal. My team expects me to do my job safely and to watch their back." Social identity defines the roles and expectations of individuals within a group and often how the individuals expect themselves to behave and work (i.e., the social identity describes "how" they belong).

Fulfilling the need for social identity reduces resistance to change and increases the desire to put in extra effort. More importantly, it becomes the source of self-driven energy to grow and maintain that identity. This creates a positive cycle for self-development, valued social identity and stronger sense of belonging. Thus, rather than demanding compliance and discipline, when managers embrace the value of social identity, people collaborate and contribute willingly. Table 3 shows day-to-day micropractices to promote a sense of belonging and positive social identities and the beliefs instilled by these practices.

Well-being is either enhanced or diminished by each social interaction between leader and follower and peer-to-peer. While micropractices are easier to adopt and can be reinforced at the local level through more immediate social feedback (rewards), changes require commitment to persist if a response is not positive at first. Employees will respond positively to managers who embody and repeatedly demonstrate these attributes. According to Fogg (2020), accumulating those microhabits can produce lasting and transformative results. It is best to select one or two micropractices and exercise them so they become habits before adding other micropractices.

Implications

There is a wealth of data connecting employee well-being with increased productivity, reduced costs, customer reten-

tion and satisfaction, increased employee engagement, and improved market performance. There will be increasing pressure for executives to understand these intangible aspects of organizational performance and learn how to value them and strengthen them for strategic advantage.

Organizations that pay attention to well-being will benefit from the multiplicative value it offers. Connected people have higher self-esteem, are more authentic and empathetic to others, more trusting and cooperative and, as a consequence, are more open to trusting and cooperating with them. People who feel connected to others have lower rates of anxiety and depression. Authenticity allows people to be themselves and to unleash their strengths and talents. Appreciation of the three personas, understanding how people behave and think differently under different situations, especially under pressure, enables a team to achieve greater collaboration, deeper support and stronger defenses.

Leaders are increasingly asked to do more with less. Focusing on well-being through micropractices releases an abundance of human potential with minimum investment. Micropractices of small positive social interactions, without imposing huge time and mental demand, work more naturally with our brain's energy conservation mode. The flexibility of this approach recognizes individual differences and allows people to choose, adapt and develop good well-being habits at their individual pace. This approach should shape the future of changing initiatives.

When employees become teammates and cocreators, they are fully engaged. In this safe environment they can grow intellectually, emotionally and socially. Adopting micropractices provides simple but effective tools that reduce resistance and support sustainable change. The recommended practices are not all inclusive. They may be changed based on interpersonal preferences and local context. When it is safe for questions and concerns to surface, creative ideas to flow and talent is nourished, it creates a culture that sharpens the competitive edge for the future of work. It also mobilizes the entire workforce to discover and confront risks, speak up to drive change, thus strengthening and becoming part of the organization's most powerful and permeating safety defense system. **PSJ**

TABLE 3
MICROPRACTICES TO PROMOTE BELONGING & POSITIVE SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Practice	Belief instilled
Make time for quality one-on-one conversations.	My boss or team member respects me and values my contribution.
Meaningful immediate recognition, particularly with reference to the respective social identities	My boss or team recognize who I am for the team.
Focused listening (e.g., maintain eye contact, leave your phone out of the conversation, stay present).	My boss or team member respect me and value my input. I feel seen and heard.
Encourage micropractices among the team members (e.g., invite others to speak for their roles, ask for input on a project, use a person's name, take time to have brief non-work-related exchanges).	It is part of my role to make others feel included.

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Mei-Li Lin, Ph.D., serves as senior vice president of innovation and solution development at DEKRA. She leads a team to develop innovative safety solutions for the future of work. Previously, Lin directed safety big data research work at IHS. She cofounded the Campbell Award and served as the first executive director for the Campbell Institute at the National Safety Council. Throughout her career, Lin has focused on integrating safety, health and sustainability goals into business strategy and is passionate about human performance and well-being.

Rosa Antonia Carrillo, M.S.O.D., is a dedicated champion of promoting safety, well-being and inclusion in the workplace who has devoted her career to coaching, teaching and developing leaders. For more than 25 years, she has helped companies transform their safety performance in oil and gas, pharmaceutical, nuclear, mining, manufacturing and power generation in multiple countries. She shares her knowledge in the book, *The Relationship Factor in Safety Leadership.* Carrillo is a member of ASSP's Long Beach Chapter and the Society's Women in Safety Excellence Common Interest Group.