



DOES CULTURE EAT WELLBEING FOR BREAKFAST?

A Communicorp White Paper

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AT WORK

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Key Takeaways

1. Organisational culture is a critical factor with the capacity to *make* or *break* the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions.
2. The outward signs of an organisation's commitment to wellbeing (e.g., campaigns, policies and procedures, training) only scratch the surface in terms of whether an organisation has meaningfully addressed wellbeing in the workplace.
3. It is vital that organisations address underlying assumptions, beliefs and values at their organisation (e.g., mental health stigma) in order for interventions to deeply influence wellbeing.
4. Measuring organisational culture, ensuring buy-in from senior leadership, and addressing conflicting priorities are valuable ways that organisations can support the seamless integration of culture with wellbeing.

Does Culture Eat Wellbeing for Breakfast?

Although many organisations understand the importance of mental health and wellbeing, the question of how to transform these good intentions into practical, effective and sustainable actions continues to be hotly debated. Organisations are overloaded with a range of possible interventions at their fingertips – including mental health awareness workshops, employee assistance programs, mindfulness training, and moreⁱ – but are these genuinely effective at improving workplace wellbeing? **And for interventions that aren't effective: Why do they fail?**

To implement actions that have a deep and long-lasting effect on wellbeing, we first need to understand the complex factors that cause interventions to succeed or flounder.ⁱⁱ In particular, we propose that one factor has an especially strong impact on wellbeing: **Organisational Culture.**

What is Organisational Culture?

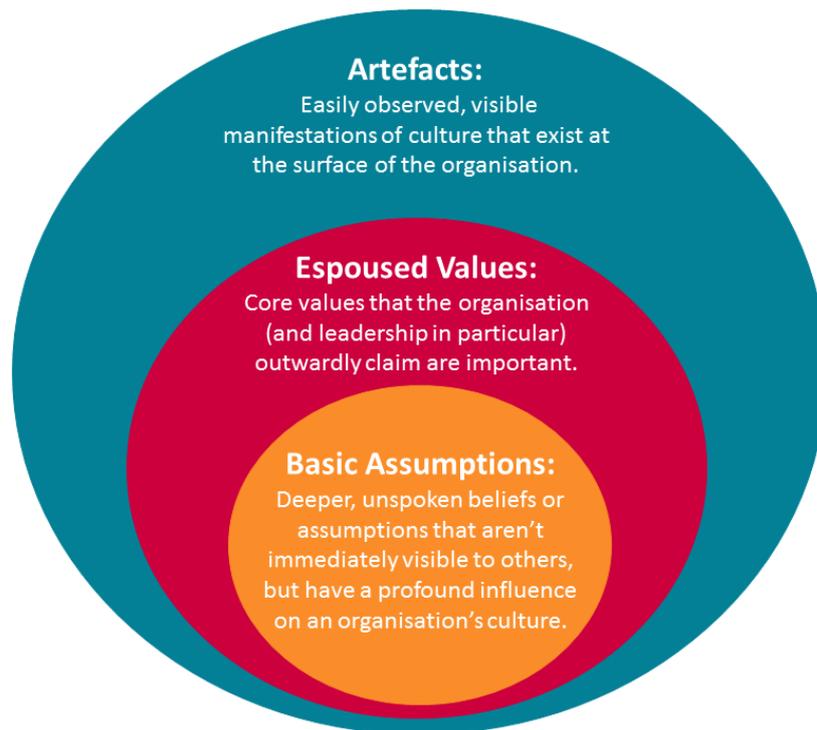
An organisation's culture refers to the **underlying norms, beliefs, values, and principles of the organisation.**^{iii iv} Various authors have described culture as the "personality" or "DNA" of an organisation,^v influencing how employees across all levels of the organisation set goals, make decisions, and address problems or crises affecting the workplace.

Other authors have characterised organisational cultures as "shadow systems" that have a profound effect on the human side of organisations, including emotions, relationships and wellbeing.^{vi} In this way, culture is not isolated from wellbeing; rather, **they are two closely intertwined concepts** with important implications for how we address the topic of wellbeing in the workplace.



Culture is the "personality" or "DNA" of an organisation, influencing how employees across all levels of the organisation set goals, make decisions, and address problems or crises.

Culture consists of **three key levels** that, in combination, have a powerful impact on organisations.^{vii} These three levels – *Artefacts*, *Espoused Values* and *Basic Assumptions* – are summarised in the diagram below. Although some aspects of culture (e.g., organisation-wide campaigns, policies and procedures, mission statements) are highly visible, outward signs of an organisation's culture, **these only scratch the surface** in terms of the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values that contribute to an organisation's culture.



How do these Levels of Culture intersect with Wellbeing?

Many organisations – **at a surface level** – use artefacts of culture to demonstrate their commitment to wellbeing. For example, businesses often use popular workplace interventions – such as mental health awareness campaigns, posters, email communications, training workshops, employee assistance programs, policies & procedures, wellbeing officers and so on – to outwardly convey a positive and supportive stance on mental health and wellbeing.

But in isolation, **do these interventions genuinely make a difference?** Research suggests that some workplace mental health interventions are more effective than others, with a number of popular options – such as counselling or psychological debriefing – receiving less support than other alternatives focused on capability development.^{viii} The positive effects of some wellbeing and resilience programs are often modest in size and decrease with the passage of time,^{ix} suggesting that longer-term benefits may be difficult to obtain and sustain. Why is this the case?

The answer often comes down to the deeper aspects of culture. The commitment of some organisations to wellbeing in the workplace is only “skin deep”, drawing attention away from harmful assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes that may be interfering with – or even undermining – well-intentioned strategies and interventions.^{x xi} When these factors are not meaningfully considered in the context of wellbeing, organisations risk investing in expensive interventions that poorly align with their core values, goals, and beliefs.



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When Culture Goes Wrong: A Closer Look at Mental Health Stigma

Mental health stigma – that is, the negative perception or judgement of people with a mental health concern^{xii} – is an important cultural barrier that, if left unaddressed, **may negatively influence the outcomes of wellbeing initiatives**. For example, research suggests that stigma towards mental illness may partially explain why some people do not engage with mental health services commonly offered by organisations (e.g., employee assistance programs).^{xiii xiv} Although it is typical for organisations to offer these kinds of services, **employees may receive a contradictory message** – communicated through the organisation’s underlying culture – that it is not appropriate, acceptable or beneficial to access these mental health services.



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Current estimates suggest that between 40-60% of employees will not seek help for a mental health condition,^{xv} and the potential reasons for this have been explored in greater depth through research into disclosing mental health conditions at work.^{xvi} On the one hand, common reasons for *disclosing* a mental health diagnosis include **desires for emotional support, honesty, and the alleviation of stress** associated with concealing one’s diagnosis. On the other hand, common reasons for *withholding* a mental health diagnosis include fears relating to **job loss, unfair treatment in the workplace, loss of credibility, social rejection, or becoming the subject of gossip**. Although many employees want to talk openly about mental health, the power of harmful assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding mental health may prevent some from doing this in practice.



On the other hand, a supportive organisational culture can have **an extremely positive impact on employees**. For example, in a study of mental health training for leaders, employees whose leaders attended the training reported an increased willingness to seek out and use available mental health resources and services.^{xvii} In separate review of 16 studies, interventions focused on mental health stigma were associated with **improved knowledge and supportive behaviour** towards people with mental health problems.^{xviii} Overall, the evidence suggests that assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes are critical aspects of culture with the capacity to either *make* or *break* wellbeing.



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Strengthening Wellbeing through a Strong Culture

To bring the benefits of a psychologically safe and healthy workplace to life, it is vital that organisations adequately consider the influence of their culture on staff. Specifically, there are four important questions that organisations should ask themselves to support the seamless integration of culture with wellbeing:

- 1. Does senior leadership share a vision for wellbeing?** The leadership of an organisation plays a critical role during change efforts by creating a compelling vision for the future, mobilising staff commitment to the vision, and driving vital shifts across the organisation in perceptions, attitudes and behaviours.^{xix} The cultivation of leadership commitment is especially important in the context of wellbeing interventions, as leaders are best positioned to convey a positive and supportive stance on wellbeing that filters down to staff.
- 2. Do you measure culture?** Developing a deep and well-rounded understanding of the underlying assumptions, beliefs and values of your organisation is likely to reveal crucial insights in the area of wellbeing. For example: To what extent do people in your organisation publicly – and privately – believe that workplace mental health is a key priority? How do those beliefs translate into the day-to-day actions of staff? Uncovering this information through a combination of surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews may help you determine the current state of your organisation’s culture, the readiness of your staff for new interventions, and where you should concentrate your efforts first.
- 3. Do your organisation’s cultural priorities conflict with wellbeing?** A common reason why organisational interventions fail is that the positive changes promoted by the intervention are overshadowed or undermined by a contradictory organisational culture. For example, organisations that implicitly encourage long working hours, poor work-life balance, or a focus on meeting business targets “at all costs” may hamper the prioritisation of wellbeing. Organisations may need to address these enduring cultural patterns before meaningful shifts in wellbeing can take place.

4. **Do your interventions complement the values of your staff?** Interventions that ignore or poorly align with the core values, goals and beliefs of staff are not likely to influence their behaviour in the longer-term. In order to negate this risk of disengagement, the pioneers of change should clearly convey why wellbeing is a key priority, highlight the connection between wellbeing and the valued goals of staff, and emphasise the valuable contributions that employees can make to the wellbeing of themselves and others.

Taken together, the research to date suggests that culture has a powerful influence on the wellbeing of organisations and their staff. Specifically, organisations that maintain alignment between the outward signs of their commitment to wellbeing (e.g., campaigns, policies and procedures, training) and their fundamental beliefs and values will be best placed to foster a psychologically safe and healthy workforce.

“Food for thought”

- Do you think that your organisation values the wellbeing of staff? What signs do you think indicate that this is (or is not) the case?
- If you went through a difficult or highly emotional experience in your workplace, would you feel comfortable speaking about your experience to a colleague? Why or why not?
- What do you think that your organisation could do differently to create a more supportive culture?

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Communicorp is a specialist psychological services firm focusing on developing positive workplace mental health, wellbeing and resilience capabilities – Australia wide.

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