

# What leaders get wrong about employee well-being and how to get it right

smartbrief.com/original/2021/08/what-leaders-get-wrong-about-employee-well-being-and-how-get-it-right

August 10, 2021



SmartBrief illustration

Many business leaders are not adequately addressing employee wellness because they are confused about or misunderstand what employees really want and need.

Here are five things that leaders fail to understand about employee well-being:

1. Well-being isn't simply physical health; it's holistic wellness.
2. One size does not fit all.
3. Control is more important than flexibility.
4. Close supervision doesn't make remote work successful; trust does.
5. Employee well-being is achieved through culture, not programs alone.

Learn more in this new video.

*To book Denise Lee Yohn to speak to your organization, see her [website](#) and [YouTube channel](#).*

*If you enjoy this article, sign up for [SmartBrief on Leadership](#) and [SmartBrief on Workforce](#), among SmartBrief's [more than 200 industry-focused newsletters](#).*

## Transcript

---

Employee well-being is at an all-time low. Nearly 83% of U.S. employees say they feel emotionally drained from their work and nearly one in four employees report experiencing severe signs of burnout, including reduced professional efficacy and cynicism towards co-workers and their jobs (source: [Mental Health America](#).)

And yet, participation in employer-provided wellness programs remains relatively low, with nearly half of employers surveyed by [The Conference Board](#) reporting that limited program participation or uptake is a barrier to successful wellness initiatives.

This suggests that business leaders are not adequately addressing employee wellness -- and that suggests that leaders may be confused about or misunderstand what employees really want and need. Here are five things I see many leaders get wrong about employee well-being.

**No. 1: Well-being isn't simply physical health; it's holistic wellness.** Physical health is the baseline and mental health is only one other dimension of well-being. There are social, professional, financial, and other aspects that contribute to whether or not an employee feels whole and healthy. So, we must understand and support wellness in all these areas.

**Second: One size does not fit all.** Well-being means different things to different employees, so it's impossible to meet all your workforce needs with a single approach. Of course, your resources are limited so you can't address every individual need, but the more options and opportunities for personalization you can offer, the better.

Which brings me to the third thing leaders often don't understand about employee well-being: **Control is more important than flexibility.** The psychologists who pioneered the Results-Only Work Environment movement in which employees are evaluated on defined outcomes of their jobs and not on where, when, and how they work [found](#) that people don't necessarily want flexible work schedules; they want "complete control over their time."

And a sense of control positively impacts well-being. So, to improve employee well-being, figure out how to give them greater control over their work.

And that leads to the next point: **Close supervision doesn't make remote work successful; trust does.** Managers who scrutinize employees' use of time, expect employees to be "always on," and require detailed work reports not only sabotage people's work quality but also cause stress and anxiety. Sometimes managing less actually produces greater employee well-being.

The last thing is that **employee well-being is achieved through culture, not programs alone.** Just because you offer employees a range of health insurance plans or programs that include mental health benefits doesn't mean you're caring for their well-being. To do that, you must also cultivate a sense of inclusion, psychological safety and hope, and ensure

employees understand the purpose and value of the work they do. So, to promote well-being, look at your culture and communications, policies and practices, as well as your wellness programs.