

OPTIMIZING POSITIVE LEADER INFLUENCE ON WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Calls-to-Action based on the
Surgeon General's 2022
Mental Health Framework

DISCLAIMER

The views presented in this document are only those of the authors. We intend to highlight and build upon the previous work of the Surgeon General's office.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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The recent Surgeon General's Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being Framework outlines five essentials for workplaces to improve the well-being of its human capital. The framework, founded on evidence and structured around important themes and resources, is a great starting point for leaders and managers to make a difference. We applaud this effort and believe the report offers many great resources for workplace leaders, managers, and supervisors.

In Section II of this report, leaders can find some specific action steps (Calls to Action) that we gleaned from the Surgeon General's Framework as well as additional areas we have learned from our research and practice.



Section I: Background

I.A. ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE NEEDED

Very often, leaders receive frameworks that either lack strategy or do not translate into tangible actions. As a result, busy leaders can be overwhelmed, lack sufficient time or money to take action, or otherwise hold others responsible for the company (e.g., human resources). While the framework provides many helpful resources, leaders can be confused about where to start. Our review also revealed several missing components as well as elements needing more emphasis. In particular, the report provides helpful practice examples from diverse companies from the macro-viewpoint. However, these examples still leave leaders with the questions like "What can I do, where can I start, and how do I proceed?" A template and checklist that guides directed action could be helpful.

I.B. OWLS ASSESSMENT OF THE FRAMEWORK

Organizational Wellness and Learning Systems (OWLS) has been researching and delivering evidence-based mental health solutions to workplaces for over 30 years. Throughout this time, we have seen that the most successful approach involves a dual responsibility between leaders and employees. Both have a role to play in taking care of themselves and each other and making the workplace safe for bringing forward or addressing mental health concerns. Our team of researchers at OWLS reviewed the Surgeon General's report, intending to help leaders and managers better discern actionable items. This whitepaper identifies three types of action items based on our analysis.

- (1) Specific Leadership Actions Derived from the Five Essentials
- (2) Additional Areas Requiring Action Focus
- (3) Action Items Based on OWLS Previous Research

SECTION II: CALLS TO ACTION

Throughout this next section, we offer each of the items in a check-list format. If you are a leader, manager, or supervisor we encourage you to:

- (1) **ASSESS** whether you are currently taking the specific action,
- (2) **IDENTIFY** gaps or areas needing improvement,
- (3) **COLLABORATE** with your team to develop a plan; include yourself as part of the solution, and
- (4) **CONSULT** the Surgeon General Framework for resources that can help.



II.A. Specific Leadership Actions Derived from the Five Essentials

Essential 1: Protection from Harm

Research shows that the physical work environment (safety, over-work, effort-reward imbalance) is a risk factor for various mental health concerns. To improve mental health, leaders need not focus only on the employee's own personal risk. Leaders, managers, and supervisors can mitigate risks due to harm in the following ways.

- (1) Review, update, and institute procedures and policies for workplace safety.
- (2) Ensure that policies promote and encourage reporting of harassment or violence (including micro-aggression and uncivil behaviors).
- (3) Implement safety programs at whatever level required by the occupations.
- (4) Implement schedules and work practices that reduce overworking and unmanageable workloads and create a healthy work pace.

Essential 2: Connection and Community

Research shows that social disconnection, alienation, isolation, and felt lack of support/belonging at work are among the greatest risk factors for many mental health problems (including substance abuse). Because of the coronavirus pandemic, many leaders and employees were more isolated than ever (and also from each other), even with digital communication. Building connections is essential as a new era of work involves new types of work arrangements. As a leader, you can attain connection and support in several ways.

- (5) Foster and celebrate inclusivity and diversity by participating directly in diversity training or joining an employee interest group.
- (6) Use equitable and diverse methods for regular lines of communication through scheduled meetings, town hall gatherings, focus groups, or social events that allow you to hear the voice of everyone.
- (7) Nourish trust in the organization through your role modeling of trust, authenticity, and transparency, and encourage other managers to do the same.
- (8) Create regular and honest communication platforms to address employees' concerns and grievances.

- (9) Personally and genuinely give to the community; show you care about social capital in your local area (e.g., community service, partnering with local non-profits that focus on mental health and substance use prevention).
- (10) Collaborate with other leaders to listen to the needs of all workers in an equitable fashion.
- (11) Find ways to be creative and innovative by asking for and using employee insights about the best way to establish remote and hybrid work settings.

Essential 3: Work-Life Harmony

As a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, employees have struggled to find work-life harmony. As a leader, you can help to realign and prioritize work-life harmony.

- (12) Create and personally adhere to policies and procedures that limit digital communications outside work hours.
- (13) Ask for ideas, insights, and personal examples from employees' experiences (failures and successes) when defining ways to balance individual and organizational needs.
- (14) Think preventatively using tools (surveys, focus groups, special interest groups) to identify and respond to employees' well-being needs. Do this periodically, not just when there is a critical incident.
- (15) Set, respect, and role model clear boundaries between time on and off the job without penalizing workers for this flexibility needed. Show workers that they can take the critical time needed for rest to optimize their health, productivity, and creativity, while alleviating anxiety or fears of missing work demands.



Essential 4: Mattering at Work

To ensure employee commitment and engagement, employees need to be treated more than as a financial asset or only appreciated for completed tasks. A lack of engagement is not just failing to treat employees with respect. Research shows that manager and supervisor verbal abuse, ignoring such behavior, and tolerating injustices affect mental health, motivation, and performance. Leaders can make employees feel like they are a significant part of the organization's success, purpose, mission, and values.

- (16) Consistently and genuinely recognize employees' achievements and contributions.
- (17) Acknowledge different levels of contribution—individuals, teams, and departments' roles—toward achieving organizational goals.
- (18) Create events, platforms, and spontaneous situations where you sincerely address and celebrate organizational success.
- (19) Include employee input and insights in workplace decisions, especially those that can help employees feel more included and uplifted by their involvement.

Essential 5: Opportunity for Growth

The workforce continues to become intellectually stronger with the development of education. Leaders can take steps to ensure their employees have constant growth opportunities. Employee confidence in their skills, self-efficacy, and a sense of growth and purpose are strong protective factors for mental health risks.

- (20) Spearhead the push for a learning culture (learning groups, opportunities for development, and knowledge sharing).
- (21) Talk to employees on a personal level (their hopes, dreams, aspirations), listen to what they have to share, and not just about how they are doing on the job.
- (22) Continuously learn yourself, join with others at work in learning groups, book studies, or seminars.



II.B. Areas Requiring Additional Focus

In the process of discerning the above action steps, we identified two additional action themes of actions that were not explicitly emphasized in the essentials. These themes focus on "Leading by Example" (take the first step as an example for your employees) and on "Mentally Healthy Work Cultures (acknowledge that improving well-being cannot be fully addressed by policies and benefits, but also require a shift in the company culture).

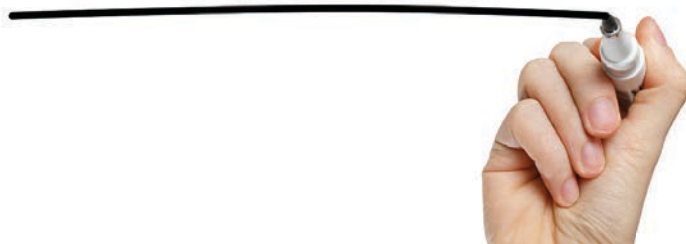
Leading By Example (from the inside out)

Leadership does not just make the decisions; they live by them. Leaders can demonstrate a genuine interest, willingness, understanding, and kindness as they effectively practice wellness-centered leadership. Leaders must model the way to harness the power of change and develop employee mental health.

- (23) Make sure, as needed, to receive support for your own mental health needs; as appropriate, share your own story and how getting help was helpful.
- (24) Respect, set, and model appropriate work-life boundaries and balance.
- (25) Educate yourself on current wellness research and practices, and identify what works best instead of just going with the recommendations of benefits consultants.
- (26) Interact with employees in times of need; show employees you care in response to critical events and fully utilize your Employee Assistance Program in the process.
- (27) Give vocal support for and participate in mental health stigma-free campaigns (including recovery-friendly workplaces).

Pulling out the directed action items and placing them in the essentials, we present a list of tangible actions any leader can take to start or continue to develop Employee Mental Health in the workplace.

LEAD BY
EXAMPLE!



Developing a Wellness Culture

Employees thrive when their mental health and well-being are seen as vital to personal and organizational success. Employee mental health is best addressed by cultivating a culture that supports, nourishes, and values the wellness of the entire workforce.

- (28) Take time to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in how the organization addresses and promotes employee mental health and take action accordingly.
- (29) Develop your own branded pathway or framework, like the Five Essentials, to create a wellness culture.
- (30) Create, provide, or promote mental health resources through regular and evidence-based training programs (e.g., on stress reduction, EAP promotion, mindfulness).
- (31) Remove any negative or stigmatizing language and spearhead new policies and procedures that take a positive (thriving and flourishing) approach to employee mental health.

II.C. Action Items Based on OWLS Previous Research

Reading and analyzing the Surgeon General's report, we also identified some areas that required more emphasis. These areas are also part of our wheelhouse as workplace mental health-related training programs providers. For example, the report only briefly discusses Employee Assistance programs and provides limited information on workplace-related efforts at substance use prevention. The list below is based on our research and practice. In the reference section below, readers can find references, tools, and resources to support these calls to action.

- (32) **Optimize the Amazing Benefit of a Well-Designed EAP.** Work closely with your Employee Assistance Provider or any benefits staff who can communicate with EAP to optimize their services (inclusive of regular promotion).
- (33) **Implement Evidence-Based Substance Abuse Prevention.** Ensure there is a deliberate focus on using both wellness-oriented and evidence-based prevention of substance abuse, including alcohol, drugs, and prescription drugs. We recommend our Team Awareness or Team Resilience programs.

- (34) **Cultivate Well-Being Champions that Align with Mental Health Promotion.** If you have an employee wellness committee or advisory group, give them tools for being champions in reducing mental health stigma. The SG report provides examples of mental health peer support (advocates, ambassadors), and you can also provide such training from the perspective of well-being and positive psychology.
- (35) **Practice the "We in Wellness."** Become knowledgeable of diverse paths to the "We in Wellness" – as part of any culture effort' integrate Essential 2 (Community) with communications and campaigns that bring out the strength of teams.
- (36) **Exercise Your Own Ripple Effect (Heart-Centered Leadership).** Become knowledgeable of the four paths of the "Ripple Effect" of leadership practices as part of Leading by Example. These four paths are (1) role-modeling healthy habits; (2) treating employees with respect and with virtue; (3) actively supporting wellness programs; and (4) making efforts to make the work environment more amenable for positive well-being.
- (37) **Go Integral.** Consider "integral" or integrated efforts where you require staff and/or vendors to collaborate from organizational development, behavioral health resources (EAP), and individual wellness.
- (38) **Go Beyond Resilience to Thriving (Raw Coping Power).** Consider evidence-based and "multi-level" resilience efforts that support individual, team, and organizational resilience.
- (39) **Bring Out Their Best Self at Work.** As part of your or other managerial training in leadership development, do your best to incorporate insights on Character Strengths (e.g., Clifton Strengths, VIA), emotional intelligence, and resilience.
- (40) **Think Social Capital! Consider Public-Private Collaboration with Non-Profits and Community-Based Agencies.** Participate in and host events that invite community resources together. Almost every city, town, community, or county has an agency for workforce development, local mental health treatment, Chambers of Commerce, and others, e.g., United Way, Catholic Charities). Employees often don't know about these services or are afraid to use them. You can make a difference.

References for Action Items Based on OWLS Research and Practice.

Please note that many of these papers can be found or downloaded from Dr. Bennett's Google Scholar page, ResearchGate, or from OWLS website.

32. Optimize the Amazing Benefit of a Well-Designed EAP. EAPs are the most widely used mental health benefit. As a result, there is a tremendous amount of research on the effectiveness and return on investment by working collaboratively with your EAP Provider. Many scholars have critically reviewed the literature evaluating the effectiveness of EAP counseling with the most comprehensive studies from programs in the US and Canada (Csiernik et al 2021) or the United Kingdom (Bajorek & Bevan, 2020). The consistent conclusion is that EAP counseling is generally effective for most users to reduce personal and clinical distress and improve work-related outcomes (particularly in restoring productivity levels). For example, a recent industry report examined case-level longitudinal data collected from over 38,000 employee users of 47 different EAPs, all measured at Pre and Post counseling on the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS; LifeWorks, 2022). The findings revealed that all five WOS outcomes showed statistically significant results, with the work presenteeism and overall life satisfaction outcomes improving the most.

Attridge, M. (2014). Employee assistance programs. In D. Guest & D. Needle (Eds.), *Human resource management: Vol. 5 in the Wiley encyclopedia of human resource management* (pp. 60–64). Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley. <http://hdl.handle.net/10713/6572>
(2022). Profile of small employers in the United States and the importance of employee assistance programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Special Issue on Supporting Workplace Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic). *American Journal of Health Promotion* 36(7),1229-1236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171221112488d>

Bajorek Z, Bevan S. (2020). Demonstrating the effectiveness of workplace counseling: Reviewing the evidence for wellbeing and cost-effectiveness outcomes. [White Paper] Report 553. Brighton, UK: Institute for Employment Studies. <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/553.pdf>

Csiernik R, Cavell M, Csiernik B. (2021). EAP evaluation 2010–2019: What do we now know? *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 36(2):105–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2021.1902336>

Employee Assistance Professionals Association. *Orientation to Employee Assistance Programs: For Mental Health Professionals in the U.S.A.* McLean, VA, USA: 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/10713/15775>

LifeWorks. (2022). *Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS) Annual Report 2021: EAP counseling use and outcomes, COVID-19 pandemic impact, and best practices in outcome data collection.* [White paper 109 pages]. Toronto, ON. Author: Attridge, M. <http://hdl.handle.net/10713/18701>

33. Implement Evidence-Based Substance Abuse Prevention. A previous report from the Surgeon General "Facing Addiction in America" identified OWLS programs (Team Awareness and Team Resilience) as effective in reducing substance use risks. These programs have also been recognized as the most promising in a recent 2022 research review. They also have the added benefit for increasing EAP utilization, reducing counter-productivity, and improving the work climate.

See 2017 Surgeon General Report

See 2022 Recent Independent Review citing Team Awareness as the most promising program for workplace prevention:

Morse, A. K., Askovic, M., Sercombe, J., Dean, K., Fisher, A., Marel, C., ... & Mills, K. L. (2022). A systematic review of the efficacy, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of workplace-based interventions for the prevention and treatment of problematic substance use. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 1051119–1051119.

Other papers (sample)

Bennett, J. B., Neeper, M., Linde, B. D., Lucas, G. M., & Simone, L. (2018). Team resilience training in the workplace: E-learning adaptation, measurement model, and two pilot studies. *JMIR mental health*, 5(2), e8955.

Reynolds, G. S., & Bennett, J. B. (2015). A cluster randomized trial of alcohol prevention in small businesses: A cascade model of help-seeking and risk reduction. *American journal of health promotion*, 29(3), 182–191.

Burnhams, N. H., London, L., Laubscher, R., Nel, E., & Parry, C. (2015). Results of a cluster randomized controlled trial to reduce risky use of alcohol, alcohol-related HIV risks and improve help-seeking behavior among safety and security employees in the Western Cape, South Africa. *Substance abuse treatment, prevention, and policy*, 10(1), 1–14.

Petree, R. D., Broome, K. M., & Bennett, J. B. (2012). Exploring and reducing stress in young restaurant workers: Results of a randomized field trial. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 26(4), 217–224.

Broome, K. M., & Bennett, J. B. (2011). Reducing heavy alcohol consumption in young restaurant workers. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(1), 117-124.

Bennett, J. B., Patterson, C. R., Reynolds, G. S., Wiitala, W. L., & Lehman, W. E. (2004). Team awareness, problem drinking, and drinking climate: workplace social health promotion in a policy context. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 19(2), 103-113.

34. Cultivate Well-Being Champions that Align with Mental Health Promotion. We have conducted champion training for the US National Guard and various providers (including insurance providers) around the United States. We have reported on our competency-based approach in the following:

Bennett, J. & Linde, B. (2016). *Well-Being Champions: A Competency-Based Guidebook*
<https://www.amazon.com/Well-Being-Champions-Competency-Based-Joel-Bennett/dp/1534686703>

See the results of our work with the National Guard "Creating a Culture of Responsible Choices"
https://organizationalwellness.com/blogs/blog/creating_a_culture_of_responsible_choices_case_study_national_guard

35. Practice the "We in Wellness." The field of Industrial/Organizational Psychology is replete with examples of how to practice the "We in Wellness." Check out this chapter and also consider measuring the wellness climate before and after any mental health initiative. Chapter and paper.

Bennett, J. E., & Tetrick, L. E. (2013). The "We" in wellness: Workplace health promotion as a positive force for health in society. In Olson-Buchanan, J. B., Bryan, L. L. K., & Thompson, L. F. (Eds.). *Using industrial-organizational psychology for the greater good: Helping those who help others*. Routledge. See Olson-Buchanan et al, 205-36.

Reynolds, G. S., & Bennett, J. B. (2019). A brief measure of organizational wellness climate: Initial validation and focus on small businesses and substance misuse. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 61(12), 1052.

36. Exercise Your Own Ripple Effect (Heart-Centered Leadership). We provide specific action steps for the ripple effect in our book and in training program on "Heart-Centered Leadership" and we have published research and a patent on this program.

Bennett, J. B., Broome, K. M., Pilley, A., & Gilmore, P. (2011). A web-based approach to address cardiovascular risks in managers: results of a randomized trial. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine/American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 53(8), 911. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3160446/>

Bennett, J. B. (2011). System and method for managing a leadership and health development program.
<https://patents.google.com/patent/US20110137669A1/en>

Steinbrecher, S., & Bennett, J. B. (2022, 3rd Edition). *Heart-centered leadership: Lead well, live well*. <https://www.amazon.com/Heart-Centered-Leadership-Lead-Well-Live/dp/B0B5KP36K2>

37. Go Integral. While it is rare to find companies that seek to bring vendors and resources together, it is possible.

Bennett, J. B. (2018). Integral Organizational Wellness™: An evidence-based model of socially inspired well-being. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 23(4), e12136.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326685014_Integral_Organizational_Wellness_An_evidence-based_model_of_socially_inspired_well-being

38. Go Beyond Resilience to Thriving (Raw Coping Power). We have trained almost 1,000 facilitators or wellness coaches in our "Resilience-to-Thrive" model. Check out Raw Coping Power and consider sending people to get trained. We also have several case studies and guidance on multi-level resilience initiatives.

Bennett, J. B. (2014). *Raw Coping Power*. <https://www.amazon.com/Raw-Coping-Power-Stress-Thriving/dp/0991510208>

Bennett, J.B. (2022). Multi-level Resilience. <https://nwijournal.com/multi-level-resilience-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/>

Bennett, J.B. (2022). Resilience 3.0: Multi-level Approaches are Essential. In *Worksite Health Promotion*, 11 (3), 9-13. International Association of Worksite Health Promotion (IAWHP). Available through <https://www.iawhp.org/>

Bennett, J.B., Courtois, P., Thorsell, S., Gassman, R., & Kopke, R., (2020). "Toward Evidence-Based Cultures of Resilience: Authentic Leadership, Mental Health and Social Connection." Published in the 2020 Proceedings from HEROForum20: A Virtual Conference (September 2020). Access here https://nwijournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/HERO_FINAL_PROCEEDINGS.pdf

39. Bring Out Their Best Self at Work. Many companies offer leadership training in strengths or emotional intelligence or resilience. Why not do all three to bring out the best in your team?

Dilla, B., & Bennett, J.B. (2021). Your best self at work: Aligning Strengths, Emotional Intelligence & Resilience. Available at <https://www.amazon.com/Your-Best-Self-Work-Intelligence/dp/1736729004>

40 Think Social Capital! Consider Public-Private Collaboration with Non-Profits and Community-Based Agencies. See our recent efforts in New York State to build social capital through collaboration.

Bennett, J.B. (2022). Toward A Public-Private Collaboration: Listening to Leadership's Needs for Mental Health, Substance Use, and Opioid Solutions. <https://www.ipma-hr.org/stay-informed/hr-news-issues/hr-news-article/toward-a-public-private-collaboration-listening-to-leadership-s-needs-for-mental-health-substance-use-and-opioid-solutions>

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