

Building a Culture of Wellbeing

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I was fortunate that, fairly early in my career, I became candid with myself about the connection between having physical health and my ability to do my job well. Based on some good advice from my brother, who is a doctor, I realized that I needed to manage my health as intentionally as I managed my work. I also gained insight that health isn't just physical. Our bodies are a complex system of processes that have a circular way of affecting each other.

I realized back then that wellbeing is about achieving harmony between your physical, emotional and cognitive self, and so I set some goals and became very intentional about achieving that balance.

When I became CEO of Steelcase, I had a strong inkling that what was true for me personally was also true in a larger context: that the wellbeing of individuals and the wellbeing of the organization they work for are inseparable. The better off employees are in terms of their personal wellbeing, the better off the company can be – in terms of fiscal fitness, agility and capabilities for innovation and growth.

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By personal wellbeing, I mean the “whole” person at work—mind, body and soul—and I realized that the physical workplace could be a powerful agent in providing an environment in which people can thrive, which would in turn allow us to build the kind of resilient and agile organization we wanted to be.

Since then, work has become even more complex and intense for nearly everyone. Stress-induced issues – the extreme opposite of wellbeing—is a risk factor that leaders can and must proactively manage, within themselves and within their organizations. People who are overly stressed, over-worked and anxiety-plagued can't frame challenges in an optimistic way and move things forward. In contrast, people who feel supported are unbounded in what they can accomplish and in the deep personal satisfaction that they gain from their work.

Our research over the past decade has shown us that if a workplace provides all the bandwidth—all the technology connections, tools and resources that people need for their tasks and projects—it can reduce friction and amplify human capabilities. It can eliminate the restraints, irritants and workarounds that slow people down and cause stress unnecessarily. As we continue to research and learn, these things become identifiable and solvable. This is what drove our decision to launch a new research project focused specifically on worker and workplace wellbeing. We wanted to look closely at what the building blocks are and how the workplace can be a source of wellbeing day-to-day. And we continue to learn about the power of place in providing an environment that serves to provide the harmony that I described earlier.

I have been fortunate in my career to have some great leaders as my mentors. One of the many insights I gained from Bob Pew, who was our CEO for decades before me, was that humans need enrichment, at work as well as away from work. If you're going to make an investment in a facility, make sure it's designed with an understanding of what really matters to people - their psychological as well as physical needs. That's stayed with me, and it's fundamental to who we are at Steelcase and what we do.

A bond is formed when a person joins a company. A workplace designed with employee wellbeing in mind can be a source of pride as well as a source of inspiration to achieve the purpose that drives the organizations reason for being. It can be a place that makes people feel good about being part of the enterprise; a place that they want to show family and friends, a place that is a visual representation of what their company stands for.

It's been my experience as CEO of Steelcase for the past 19 years, that work is inherently a social endeavor, and that when you understand the purpose and emotional health of great companies is centered around people, you can take performance to a much higher level.

Creating places that provide for the wellbeing of people at work is critical for success. It's that simple. And that powerful.

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