positive psychology can improve well-being at work

Five measurable elements can enhance employee well-being and bring competitive advantage, says Alexandra Hatfield, L&D Consultant.
Structural changes and a requirement to ‘do more with less’ have created a more demanding workplace for many employees. To help individuals cope with the resultant pressure and adversity, some organisations are introducing resilience training. This is important but sometimes it doesn’t go far enough, as a growing number of employees also want to improve their life satisfaction. Actually, these two goals can be achieved together. HR teams can help people respond to the high-pressure challenges of the workplace - and increase personal productivity, engagement and meaning at work - by improving employee well-being.

The key to this is positive psychology. Already that presents a problem. The word ‘psychology’ has a stigma in the workplace. However since 1998, a new field of psychology has been looking at how people can become more fulfilled and more productive. While traditional psychology is about finding out what’s wrong with you, this new movement of positive psychology is concerned with what makes life worth living. It’s a science that’s grounded in rigorous research.

so how can it be applied in organisations?

Many employees have fixed views about the workplace, forged by their past experience. They may have embedded mindsets that no one cares about them at work, they can’t cope with their workload, their initiative is stifled or they’re shouldering responsibility without any recognition. If someone is in this state, their reaction to any event at work is likely to be negative.

Positive psychology can help. It encourages us to re-educate our brains by questioning the ‘reality’ we create for ourselves and reframing events. When something happens, instead of responding with an unconscious reaction, we can query that stimulus, take a more balanced view and make a conscious choice to respond more constructively, whatever the situation. Initially, this is difficult to achieve but with practise, it can become a learned behaviour that no longer requires conscious effort. We like to call it the power of true choice.

An important aspect of positive psychology is to understand and build on your own strengths and virtues. Unfortunately, some learning and development exposes people’s weaknesses. We look at our development needs’ to determine where we should improve. Most businesses operate the same way, in that they try to resolve ‘problems’ in order to move forward. Positive psychology builds on appreciative inquiry: it’s about promoting positives, not correcting negatives. Don’t ask: what’s wrong with me? Ask: what’s right with me? What do I do well? Each of us can benefit considerably by recognising our strengths and by using them for our own benefit and for the benefit of others - this in itself is a whole new mindset.

You can assess your strengths with a free online test, available at authentichappiness.org. Called the VIA Survey (Virtues in Action), it measures and rates you against 24 strengths such as courage, integrity, perseverance, critical thinking, loyalty and ingenuity. Once you know your strengths, the secret is to use them as much as you can.

When you use your highest strengths in your work, something interesting happens. You feel more positive, more engaged, more valuable, you work better with other people, you accomplish more and your job becomes more fulfilling. You’re also more attentive, more inclined to network and more receptive to learning.
five pillars

The father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, highlights five pillars of well-being that lead to a more fulfilling life. His PERMA model stands for:

positive emotion
Seligman feels ‘happiness’ is too woolly a term, so he has crystallised it into positive emotion. Learning to appreciate and be grateful for what we have, can help with this. Try this exercise: write down three good things that happen each day and why they went well. They can be big or small things. Do this for a week and you’ll start to feel more positive.

engagement
When we’re not engaged, we feel bored and useless; when we’re engaged, we’re inspired and absorbed. By consciously engaging in work and activities that utilise our core strengths, we can become more confident and more productive.

relationships
Positive and trusting relationships contribute to our well-being. If you want the single most reliable momentary increase in your well-being, do something unexpectedly kind for someone else.

meaning
This stems from having a purpose in life; something that excites you. Employees often understand what they have to do and how to do it - but not why. If we believe our work is worthwhile, we feel a general sense of well-being. The challenge is to dedicate your time to something that’s greater than yourself but which is consistent with your values and beliefs.

accomplishment
It’s often said that winning isn’t everything. But we all need to win sometimes. Set tangible goals and acknowledge and celebrate your little successes along with the big ones. Take pride in your accomplishments. You may even inspire others around you to achieve their goals.

These five elements are essential for our well-being. Together, they form the foundation for achieving our potential and for building a happy and flourishing life.

For individuals, positive psychology can be personally and professionally transforming. For organisations, using it to support the well-being of staff is not only the ‘right’ thing to do, it can also bring competitive advantage. It makes employees more engaged and more productive - and it builds better working relationships and resilience. It can also make your company a more attractive place to work. Best of all, it’s cost effective to achieve.

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