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Cultivating a culture of well-being: Investing in employee mental health fortifies ethics
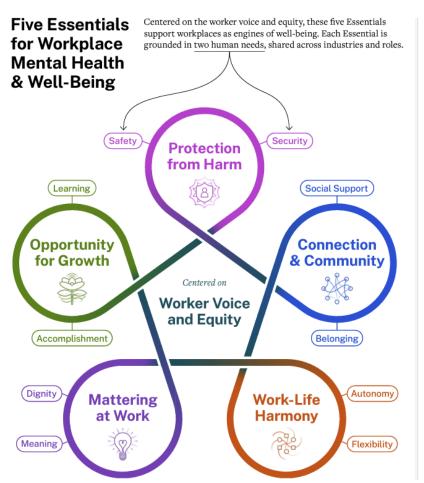
By Frank Orlowski

In the past year within the United States, we have seen a stronger focus on mental health. This emphasis can be seen in many noteworthy U.S. organizations, including visible sports organizations like the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association. However, one might wonder: How does this relate to compliance and ethics professionals?

Well-being links to ethics

In the contemporary corporate landscape—characterized by fierce competition, unrelenting demands, and an external public relations focus on mental health—a compelling truth has emerged: Prioritizing employee well-being is not merely a matter of individual concern but a critical element of building an ethical and sustainable business. This recognition has developed into a shift in corporate priorities, with companies recognizing a link between employee mental health and ethical conduct. By investing in initiatives promoting well-being—which may be launched first and foremost to improve mental health—we are seeing that it also cultivates a more positive and ethical work environment, reaping significant benefits for individuals and the organization. For example, the U.S. Surgeon General's *Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being*, which was published in 2022, mentions essential workplace mental health and well-being principles (see Figure 1).[1] When these five essentials are out of balance, there is a direct correlation between the well-being of workers and the health of organizations. It talks about how the imbalance results in not only traditional burnout and stress but also behavioral changes, which can lead to poor decision-making.

Figure 1: Five mental health essentials from the U.S. Surgeon General

Five Essentials for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

Centered on the worker voice and equity, these five Essentials support workplaces as engines of well-being. Each Essential is grounded in two human needs, shared across industries and roles.

Protection from Harm
- Safety
- Security

Opportunity for Growth
- Learning
- Accomplishment

Connection & Community
- Social Support
- Belonging

Mattering at Work
- Dignity
- Meaning

Work-Life Harmony
- Autonomy
- Flexibility

Centered on **Worker Voice and Equity**

Components

Creating a plan with all workers to enact these components can help reimagine workplaces as engines of well-being.

Protection from Harm
- Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety
- Enable adequate rest
- Normalize and support mental health
- Operationalize DEIA* norms, policies, and programs

Connection & Community
- Create cultures of inclusion and belonging
- Cultivate trusted relationships
- Foster collaboration and teamwork

Work-Life Harmony
- Provide more autonomy over how work is done
- Make schedules as flexible and predictable as possible
- Increase access to paid leave
- Respect boundaries between work and non-work time

Mattering at Work
- Provide a living wage
- Engage workers in workplace decisions
- Build a culture of gratitude and recognition
- Connect individual work with organizational mission

Opportunity for Growth
- Offer quality training, education, and mentoring
- Foster clear, equitable pathways for career advancement
- Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback

*Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

One does not have to be a mental health professional to draw the conclusion that employees grappling with mental health challenges have a reduced level of judgment and are more likely to engage in unethical behavior, which is influenced and exacerbated by work stress.[2] This can impact everything from productivity and collaboration to organizational trust and reputation. Mental health challenges can affect an individual's cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and decision-making skills—including unethical decision-making. However, it is very important to note that not all individuals with mental health challenges engage in unethical behavior, and not all unethical behavior is caused by mental health challenges.

Management has an effect

One example was in 2016 when CNN interviewed Wells Fargo employees about how the bank's highly aggressive sales goals created an environment where unethical behavior was rewarded. This came out after the bank admitted to shareholders that as many as two million unauthorized bank and credit card accounts had been opened.[3]

Secondly, even the famed Warren Buffett, explaining Berkshire Hathaway's practices in the annual letter to shareholders in February 2019, notes that he and Vice Chairman Charlie Munger "have seen all sorts of bad corporate behavior, both accounting and operational, induced by the desire of management to meet Wall Street expectations. What starts as an 'innocent' fudge in order to not disappoint 'the Street'—say, trade-loading at quarter-end, turning a blind eye to rising insurance losses, or drawing down a 'cookie-jar' reserve—can become the first step toward full-fledged fraud."[4]

Much has been done in recent years to combat this bad behavior. When employees feel understood, supported, and empowered to prioritize their well-being, it fosters an environment where ethical decision-making flourishes. This underscores mental health's crucial role in shaping a culture of integrity and ethical conduct within an organization.

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