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Corporate Wellness

Why your CEO is a barometer for corporate wellness.



By Christopher Paterson

If I want to understand a company's wellness profile, I don't talk to HR or the appointed 'wellness champion'. I go straight into observing the CEO.

Corporate wellness is defined not by intent but by what people do, and like all organisational behaviour, the tone is set from the top. Therefore, the CEO sets the wellness agenda for the executive

team, who in turn set the expectations of their leaders. The most positive intent in the world doesn't stand a chance against the weight of these behaviours. Therefore, without the CEO, investment in corporate wellness will be an interesting exercise that is unlikely to result in any sustained impact.

When working with executives, I use the analogy of an airline safety

demonstration. A CEO needs to look after their own wellbeing first before looking after the wellbeing of others. Unless they ensure that they get the oxygen they need, not only will their own performance suffer but they will be of little use to their business. Let's face it: a CEO on the verge of burnout is of no use to any business. This is no longer a 'soft' issue; it is a clear and present danger to the health of any organisation.

Most leaders have an ingrained idea that they should always be available for their staff regardless of the circumstances. This creates an outflow of emotional energy that is not restored unless the executive concerned takes decisive and consistent action to be 'selfish' and get that oxygen.

Our organisation recently carried out research on the factors that facilitate executive wellbeing, resilience, and sustainability and found that there are six key areas that executives need to focus on in order to make great decisions and be at their best. Unfortunately, our results showed that few executives scored high across the board. To create your own executive wellness scorecard, rate yourself out of 10 on each of the factors highlighted below.

1. Nutrition

You may very well need those executive-strength formula vitamins, but how do you know? A hypothesis without a thorough diagnostic of what your body needs right now is purely a guess. The smart play is to get complete blood work done with your healthcare professional so you can fuel your body with what it specifically needs.

2. Activity

In order to operate at a consistently high level, the executive brain needs bloodflow. The good news is that 30 minutes of low-intensity activity will suffice (e.g. walking). Humans are not designed to be sedentary for longer than 45 minutes at a time, so it is important that you get up, stretch, and get the blood moving regularly throughout the day. Organisations from Silicon Valley to our very own Australian Tax Office have now implemented software that reminds staff to stretch and get the blood flowing. Just because you are a CEO doesn't mean you have different physiology.

3. Sleep

We can't fight our body clock (circadian rhythms), but we can work with them to reboot and refresh our body. One mistake that executives make is taking technology to bed. This stimulates the brain when the body is on the down cycle towards restorative sleep. The outcome is a scrambled sleep pattern and not nearly enough quality restoration. This can result in 'sleep debt' that is equivalent to being above 0.05 blood alcohol. Therefore, regular patterns and a good old-fashioned alarm clock is a great investment in quality, restorative sleep.

4. Social connections

Regardless of personality, we are a social species and our brain chemistry benefits from connecting regularly with positive people. Social withdrawal, however, is an early warning signal that pressure is having an impact—hence the power of the R U OK movement. If you do find yourself being isolated, don't be a passenger; make a commitment to step out and arrange to catch up with your friends and family.

5. Time out

Each time I work with an executive at risk of burnout, a common factor is that they feel too busy to take a break. A short break is an executive-sustainability measure that just happens to be pleasurable as well. Whether it is a family holiday or just a weekend away, book it in now.

6. Outlet

Your outlet is that activity that engages your mind and body to the extent that you lose track of time. Yoga and surfing are all good examples, as are gardening, golf, and walking the dog. The neurological importance of unplugging from the everyday allows the brain to get back to a neutral state. We are not built to

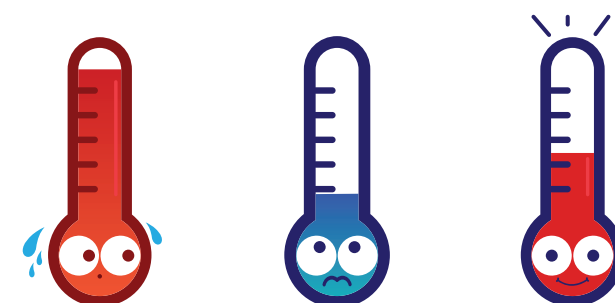
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run from one adrenaline-fuelled situation to the next—and to attempt this gives the executive an 'illusion of effectiveness' that is not sustainable. If you don't have an activity in mind, then finding one to do individually or with friends is a priority.

Now look at your scorecard and think of something practical that you will do differently to improve your low scores. Our 2014 research shows that making small changes here reduced stress by 8 per cent and workload pressure by 16 per cent in six weeks.

If we were a smart species, we would respond to pressure by boosting these six factors. Unfortunately, in reality the opposite happens—we make poor food choices, become a slave to the desk, work longer hours, sleep less, avoid our friends, fail to take a break, and rarely switch off.

The highly functioning executive rises to the top because they are selfish enough to make a decision to be at their best and look after their own wellness. In doing this, they are able to support their people and their business more effectively and successfully over the short and long terms. •



About Christopher Paterson
Christopher Paterson is the managing director of ALCHEMY Career Management, a firm that supports individuals to transition their career, assists companies adapting to organisational change, and delivers Wellness@Work™ programs for any organisation wanting to help staff to be at their best. For more information, visit alchemycm.com.au.