



Dealing with Workplace Unhappiness and Falling Productivity

By JON CLIFTON



Long before the pandemic, unhappiness has been on the rise. And this is negatively impacting productivity. What can corporate leaders do to address this? How can organisations encourage happier, healthier and more productive behaviours to benefit all stakeholders, from employees and the board to shareholders, investors and consumers?

Ensuring that an organisation's workplace productivity and overall health and wellbeing supports a long-term growth strategy is crucial for the success and sustainability of any business. But how can the board and other corporate leaders cultivate an environment that fosters productivity, good health and wellbeing in the workforce?

The key is employee engagement

Improved employee engagement is associated with increased productivity and other positive

business outcomes like lower attrition, increased customer engagement and loyalty, and greater profitability. Thus, corporate leaders have a responsibility to create a workplace that promotes productivity, engagement and wellbeing for all employees.

Gallup first began tracking happiness worldwide in 2006. Unfortunately, the findings indicate unhappiness has been rising globally for more than a decade, which is, in turn, eroding productivity. Southeast Asia is not immune to this.

With the rise in numbers of people quitting during the Great Resignation, many are most likely to be actively disengaged from their jobs. So, when people are emotionally detached from a workplace, the immediate risk is they will leave.

Unhappiness is growing globally

According to Gallup's data, negative emotions – the aggregate of stress, sadness, anger, worry and physical pain – reached a record high last year, while loneliness, rising hunger and misery globally were found to be the key indicators of growing unhappiness.

The dire situation was not caused directly by the pandemic. It had been coming for a long time, and the pandemic only exacerbated the concerning rise in negative emotions.

Eight out of 10 full-time workers say they enjoy the work they do, but only a dismal 20 per cent of employees are thriving at work.

The reason is not the work; it is the workplace. Fix the world's broken workplace, and we will stop the global rise of unhappiness related to work.

The consequences of this unhappiness are tangible and severe. People make decisions and act based on how they feel. It impacts their behaviour with respect to voting, protesting and even causing harm to themselves or others. For example, as unhappiness increased between 2011 and 2019, so did civil unrest. According to the Global Peace Institute, civil unrest increased by 244 per cent between 2011 and 2019 – then increased exponentially after that.

When it comes to work, the evidence is clear: Happy, engaged employees are productive employees. Therefore, there is an urgent need

for the board to address the issue of workplace unhappiness to boost employee engagement and increase productivity. But what does this entail?

Articulate the purpose of the business

Businesses exist to do more than just make money. One of the first steps for the board of directors and the rest of the corporate leadership team is to develop a clear purpose, vision and mission statement that will guide the organisation's decision-making and set long-term goals for the organisation.

Defining this explicitly at the outset provides a roadmap for the organisation's future and helps employees understand their role in achieving its objectives. More than that, putting the company's purpose and mission statement into words gives the business a core philosophy that can anchor its growth, providing a solid foundation for the framework and structure that will determine how the business is run.

Every modern business must also take into account environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors. ESG considerations should be a critical part of every business conversation. And it is important to remember that the organisation's social responsibility extends to all stakeholders, not just employees, shareholders and the board. In other words, corporate leaders have a duty to actively listen to all stakeholders (the community, suppliers, partners, regulators, etc) and make informed decisions for the organisation that consider the opinions and beliefs of all involved parties.

Build a fair, transparent and positive work environment

To support productivity, it is important to establish clear expectations and performance

standards for all employees and to provide ongoing feedback and support to help them meet these standards. This can include setting specific goals and objectives, providing training and development opportunities, and offering regular performance evaluations.

Fostering a positive and inclusive work culture is also essential for long-term success. This means valuing diversity, promoting collaboration and teamwork, and creating an environment where employees feel valued and supported.

On top of that, corporate leaders should encourage open communication and transparency and create opportunities for employees to provide input and feedback on the direction of the organisation. This helps to build trust and foster a sense of ownership and commitment among employees and will keep the business up to date about what employees want.

Ensure employee wellbeing

Investing in employee development and training is another critical way to support productivity and long-term growth. Corporate leaders need to ensure the organisation has robust training programmes and sufficient professional development and career advancement opportunities. The business should also enable employees to readily acquire new skills and knowledge, so they can grow.

Promoting work-life balance and supporting the physical and mental health of employees is crucial for long-term success. This can include initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, wellness programmes and employee assistance programmes. By supporting the overall wellbeing of employees, organisations can reduce

absenteeism, increase retention and improve productivity.

Train managers to be better managers

There is a growing awareness of burnout in the workplace, and people often believe that being overworked is the biggest driver – but that is not true. The biggest driver of burnout is perceived unfair treatment at work, typically as a result of poor management.

Gallup has discovered that the manager is responsible for 70 per cent of an employee's wellbeing at work. Today, it is common for employees to climb the ranks because they are technical experts at what they do; but they are rarely trained to manage people.

If the board can implement policies and processes to help improve the quality of the organisation's managers, likely through structured learning and development frameworks and rigorous training, it will significantly enhance workplace wellbeing.

Build healthier, happier workplaces

Today's fast-moving business landscape challenges businesses across all industries and sectors to be more effective, efficient and productive, stay competitive and react quickly under pressure to flourish even in uncertain conditions. The board of directors and the corporate leadership have an important role to play in creating and maintaining a positive work environment that supports an engaged and healthy workforce, enables improved wellbeing and greater productivity, and ensures the long-term success and growth of the organisation. ■

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