25 Truths about Resilience & Well-Being
Insights from the Resilience & Well-Being Conference
Enable Your Workforce to Thrive in the Face of Change and Disruption
New York City, October 5-6, 2017

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”
—Nelson Mandela

When more than 100 practitioners and experts met to talk about resilience and well-being, we took notes. Here are the highlights.

Resilience, the ability to recover quickly from negative events, correlates with lower pain levels, higher satisfaction in work, enthusiasm, and success. And in today’s volatile world, where businesses are pushing employees to produce more with less, resilient brains in healthy bodies are what separates workers from fatigue, burnout, and a crippling lack of focus. The best initiatives offer a choice of resilience and well-being tools and easy access, and they are supported by a stigma-free culture.

RESILIENCE: A DEFINITION

Resilience refers to the group of characteristics of people who respond well to pressure and bounce back quickly. These are specific behaviors that help people to perform well in complex, demanding, and unpredictable environments. Resilient individuals stay engaged during hard times, feel competent to influence the outcome of challenging circumstances, and view challenges as a growth and learning opportunity.
Why is “resilience” trending? Because the workplace is toxic.

The multigenerational, digitally connected, rapidly changing world of work is taking us on a ride for which we haven’t yet evolved the skills. “The iPhone 10 will mainline stress into your prefrontal cortex,” is how one wellness expert put it. So will a business environment that needs and expects people to perform under heightened stress. And the messages employers are sending out are ambivalent at best.

1. “Talent is our most important asset,” is a common phrase among C-suites. But offshoring talent is a top strategy. In an atmosphere like this, common solutions won’t work:
   - Harmful: telling employees, “Suck it up—this is the new normal!”
   - Harmful: “toxic wellness” programs that penalize employees for unhealthy habits.
   - Helpful, but not the whole answer: passive programs that reward employees with wellness points and the like. While such programs, if run well, do encourage personal responsibility, they often become simply another item on busy employees’ “to-do” lists. The end goal should be a holistic approach in which leaders recognize the importance of well-being to their employees and the company, and attack both the causes and the effects of disengagement and burnout.

2. Burnout—the product of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficiency—is an existential threat to mission-driven companies. And the minute you blame workers for their own burnout, you play into that cynicism and you lose them.

3. Mitigating disengagement and burnout can take many forms—as many different forms as there are different people who can benefit. What you provide—sabbatical programs, mindfulness sessions, yoga, life coaches, counselors—matters less than the fact that you are providing a wide choice of empowering initiatives for all employees.

4. Know that sometimes mindfulness is inadequate. “The elephant in the room is workload,” said a nurse who is in charge of wellness for a large publishing company. If workers are exhausted from 12-hour shifts and mandatory overtime, encouraging them to cut down on caffeine is counterproductive at best.

And, by the way, is “resilience” really what we should be calling it? Would resilience by another name work even better?

“A few years ago,” said a sleep expert, “this would have been called a ‘Stress Conference.’” Resilience is a pioneering industry that is not yet well understood. In the sensitive area of psychology, terms matter.
5. There is a big difference between resilience and stress management. The latter is reactive, in the moment, and clinical. The former is proactive, preparatory, and psychologically positive. Palm trees don’t put down roots during a hurricane—by then, it’s too late.

6. The word resilience creates an unintended consequence: anticipatory anxiety. Telling your employees that you want to grow their resilience is tantamount to telling them you are about to put them into a situation that will require resilience. In other words, you are going to teach them to bounce back so you can knock them down. Reframing is the answer.

7. “Meditation” is another term that may backfire. When a Singapore company changed its “Meditation Class” to “Mindful Performance Enhancement,” people actually showed up.

8. Meditation works better if it sneaks up on the uninitiated. A law firm begins its practice by saying, “Here’s a ten-minute exercise to get you focused.” That exercise is actually the meditation.

9. Make sure that what you are doing does not trivialize the very real stress that your workforce feels. “Hey, we just laid off a lot of you guys, but take this mindfulness seminar and you’ll feel better” is the last message you want to communicate. Put your mindfulness seminar in a larger context of physical, mental, and even corporate health.

**Whatever you call it, it starts with your brain.**

By design, the brain is a conflicted organ, constantly gravitating between short-term and long-term desires and between emotional and rational responses. A focused brain is more likely to make good choices. Achieving this focus has never been easy; today’s cognitive overload and increased stresses makes it even tougher. Fortunately, research has found ways to help.

10. The kidneys are designed to work 24 hours a day. But the brain gets tired. And a tired brain is more likely to operate on default mode, characterized by wandering thoughts and an inability to concentrate. About 70% of the time, we are on default mode, accomplishing less and worrying more than we should.

11. Along with lack of focus, fear and fatigue are the enemies of mindful attention, the kind of mindfulness that leads to immersion in the flow of work. To achieve this mindfulness, the brain needs oxygen, glucose, motivation, and uplifting emotions. Sample exercise in intentional gratitude: the instant you wake up, think of five people who care about you. These thoughts will flood the brain with oxytocin rather than stress hormones, boosting mood and mindfulness.

12. Emotional resilience, which will allow you to recover when the inevitable stresses occur, can be developed in five ways:
• Practice gratitude. Did you lose out on a promotion? Be grateful that you were considered for it.

• Enrich compassion by finding commonalities with others.

• Accept adversity by reframing it. If you hadn’t missed the flight, you would have missed the sunset.

• Find what brings you meaning.

• Practice forgiveness. Kindness, said a physician who researches happiness, is the mortar that holds the bricks of life together. But it must be remade every day.

13. About 70% of US workers are not engaged in their jobs (a number that correlates with the amount of time we spend on default mode). At the same time, 155 million Americans regularly play video games, most for at least three hours a week. They pursue this activity, as a gaming specialist said, “like it’s their job.” Why? Because video games offer the kind of interactive play that stimulates the brain’s motivation and learning centers, such as:

• Expression of a wide range of emotions, including pride, wonder, and curiosity

• Shared attention to the same goal, which brings people closer

• A sense of abundance, at least in games where multiple options are available and every player can win.

• Intrinsic optimism, i.e., in the words of the British writer G.K. Chesterton, “the idea of something around the corner.”

14. Play, at least in the video game sense, is not the opposite of work; it’s the opposite of depression. It’s focus, and it’s engagement. A workplace that can provide the shared attention, abundance, and optimism of, say, Pokémon Go or Call of Duty can train workers’ brains to respond better to stress and obstacles. It can even help with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other brain issues.

15. Three ways to fire up your brain at work, inspired by video game principles:

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• Make a prediction about anything at all. This sets you up for optimism—you might turn out to be right—and feedback.

• Take a walking meeting. Walking side-by-side engages the mirror neurons that aid bonding and trust. You are timing your pace to another person.

• Add an unnecessary obstacle. All games contain such obstacles. Brush your teeth with your nondominant hand for a week. This will activate dormant neurons and energize your brain.

SNAPSHOT

A hospital makes strides in employee well-being

A major healthcare facility now has a majority millennial workforce: millennials who in large part work at this facility a few years and then move elsewhere. Millennials perceive higher stress, don't make a distinction between work and life, and value meaning, culture, and purpose. How did the organization help them and their boomer counterparts to achieve resiliency?

First, the organization recognized that while healthcare workers know how to take care of themselves, they don't have time to do it. Three-fourths of nurses surveyed reported chronic stress and sleep issues that could contribute to patient care mistakes. Staff at this organization reported money, health of family members, and work as their top stressors.

The organization created a program that included integrative health, yoga, mindfulness, Reiki, onsite coaching, and targeted communications. It installed a relaxation room with a massage chair, herb gardens, and adult “recess,” complete with cards, Play-Do, and coloring books. The organization offered a $1,170 annual reduction

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3 For more on the characteristics of the Millennial generation, see Divergent Views, Common Ground: The Leadership Perspectives of C-Suite Executives and Millennial Leaders, The Conference Board Research Report, 2016.
in healthcare costs for employees who undertook a wellness assessment. But most employees were not big on incentives. They were more interested in programs and interventions that directly attacked stress, such as team discussions among NICU and PICU teams and internal committees to “care for colleagues” after traumatic events.

Research revealed to the organization that many employees felt “alone,” contributing to pain and lost time to illness. As a morale booster and team-building exercise, the organization entered into a “step” contest with another leading healthcare organization. The goal was to walk more steps than the competition. This was a simple contest that could engage every single employee.

Everyone wants tools for resilience. But tools without context will fail.

The best resilience and well-being programs are stigma-free, engaging, personalized, convenient, and accessible. In other words, achieving a great resilience program is no easier than achieving resilience itself. But it can be done—if you take baby steps, practice sensitivity, and keep employees’ needs front and center.

16. Do the intro session first, then sign people up for the program. A law firm that sold its program this way got 100% signup from a naturally distrustful population.

17. Be consumer-driven. Different things work for different people. Not everybody wants yoga. And nobody cares about maternity benefits—until they’re pregnant, at which point maternity benefits are all they care about.

18. Use neuroscience to show your seriousness and dissipate the “fluffiness” that many will read into well-being initiatives.

19. Personal coaching and therapy can be invaluable, but so can group dynamics. Groups working together reinforce habits and enhance the scalability of programs.
20. When you offer choices to the workforce, you go a long way toward creating a culture of well-being. A healthcare company let employees pick an extra paid holiday. (They chose Super Bowl Monday.)

21. Listen. If you listen to someone, even for 30 seconds, that person will feel heard. If you don’t listen, that person will just think you’re trying to change him or her.

SNAPSHOT

Are you sleeping?

We have known for a while that poor health causes poor sleep. But in recent years we have learned the corollary: poor sleep causes poor health. When you are short of sleep, the amygdala (the portion of the brain that regulates emotion) is hyper-aroused, while less glucose is directed to the prefrontal cortex (the portion of the brain that regulates planning and rational thought). That means you are more prone to emotional decisions, limiting self-control, empathy, and creativity, and increasing the incidence of anxiety, depression, paranoia, and hallucinations. Lack of sleep leads additionally to lack of exercise (tired people have a harder time getting to the gym). Lack of exercise leads to increased stress, which leads to unhealthy eating, which leads to greater risk of obesity and even accidents.

There are sleep-encouraging apps available that test subjects’ sleep behavior and use this input to design a personalized six-week sleep program. The results so far show that those who complete the program can experience up to three more hours a week of good sleep.
Measuring the return on your wellness investment is a long game.

Proving the link between wellness and profit is tough. Start by linking wellness to engagement. When numbers are elusive, use anecdotes and stories. As well-being initiatives become better understood and more connected to healthcare and employee assistance programs, measurement will become more quantitative.

22. Before he joined a six-session resilience coaching program, an attorney’s wife advised him, “Make sure that you tell them that stress is your air.” For that attorney, “stress is my air” was a baseline from which to measure personal progress. After the program, another participant credited it with saving her marriage—another anecdotal marker of success.

23. A healthcare company measures the effect of its resilience initiatives by a short-term controlled study and a one-year lookback and analysis that measures progress against the company’s estimated “$85 million stress problem,” a figure derived from the corporate medical expenditure on stress-related problems.

24. A problem with measuring engagement is feedback structure. A manager gets a letter telling him his department has poor engagement. He tells his direct reports this. They respond by being more positive on the next engagement survey—and nobody has done a thing to change the situation.

25. “We might have beliefs and aspirations about sleep, mindfulness, and self-actualization,” said the health director of a medical diagnostics company, “but in today’s quarter-by-quarter culture, CFOs want solutions.” Those solutions lie in linking wellness outcomes to insurance coverage, assistance programs, and, through this linkage, coming to a more holistic understanding of general well-being.
These insights represent highlights from discussions held by more than 100 senior executives who attended the Resilience & Well-Being Conference on October 5-6, 2017. The views expressed are those of the presenters and participants of the Conference. Presenters include executives from a cross-section of companies and industries:

Mark Aloia  
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Sandy Zornek  
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Director of Benefits & Wellbeing
ACTIONS TO TAKE
What actions will participants take after the Conference? A post-conference “action survey” highlights a range of objectives:

- Focus on foundation of emotional and mental health for all staff.
- Focus on my own sleep and emotional health. Lead by example.
- Recommend “Morning Gratitude” to my team—and my spouse.
- Tweak the way we try to get buy-in and engagement by leading with the neuroscience. I think we’ve been way too “fluffy” with our approach.
- Build a business case for resilience.
- Learn how to incorporate more resilience and mindfulness into our well-being program.
- Develop a strategy on sleep issues.
- Create focus groups to gauge the employee’s perspective, experience and what they want.
- Look into resiliency and well-being methods for employees in public service; emergency management, police officers, fire department, etc., for employees that have the added stress of serving the public and working 24/7.

Related Resources from The Conference Board

22 Truths about Change and Transformation
July 2017
Change today is almost always related to the digital revolution. Companies are using digital to become more digital—and to become faster, nimbler, and more transparent. This is radical change, and it’s not easy. It takes changes of strategy and organization, as well as leaders who have transformed their own capabilities and attitudes. Microlearning is one way that leaders and employees can begin to master the new technology.

25 Truths about Leadership Development
June 2017
What makes a leader? While leadership roles may be formal and staid, leadership development professionals are finding that even employees without managerial authority can influence the business culture of an organization. Whether you work for a small business or a large multinational organization, an organized leadership development program can help you unlock the hidden potential of your talent. By examining leadership models, you will find the qualities of leadership in many employees across units and functions in your workplace.
DNA of Engagement: How Organizations Can Foster Employee Ownership of Engagement
February 2017

Despite companies increasing investment in employee engagement programs and leadership initiatives, fewer than a third of workers around the globe elicit high levels of commitment and discretionary effort. This is troubling because engaged employees are more productive and innovative. This lack of employee engagement raises the question of who in the organization is responsible for creating an engaging culture—senior management? Human resources? The entire workforce? This report, building on previous findings from The Engagement Institute™ on what creates engaging cultures and leaders, explains how individual employees need to be responsible for managing their own engagement and what companies can do to enable it.

CEO Challenge 2017: Leading through Risk, Disruption, and Transformation
January 2017

The biggest challenges for CEOs in 2017 come from global volatility and unprecedented disruption. Leaders are coping by focusing on talent, culture, and fiscal discipline. Our annual CEO survey reveals common concerns and strategies: fiscal prudence to counter recession concerns, efforts to engage and upskill employees in a tight labor market, and more personalization and customization to meet customer needs as digital technology transforms the way consumers and businesses interact. CEOs are using these strategies as they navigate six core business issues: human capital, innovation and digitization, sustainability, regulation and risk, operational excellence, and customer relationships/corporate brand and reputation.

March 2017

At a time when economies are struggling with low growth, fierce competition, aging workforces, and skill shortages, firms are turning to technology-based innovation as a solution. Seismic shifts are happening: work, the workforce, leadership, and human resource management are transforming. In the face of such profound transformation, it is vital for the HC community to help shape this emerging world of work and to lead the debate about how best to harness technology for business success in a way that builds a sustainable, equitable, and healthy future for permanent and flexible workers alike—instead of allowing technology to drive these changes.
22 Truths about Performance Management: Insights from the Performance Management Summit
March 2017

Performance management has evolved from multiday conversations between manager and employee geared toward developing the employee for a management role to one annual conversation to communicate merit pay. Now companies are overhauling their performance management systems to eliminate ineffective processes that do not reflect a contemporary workforce, remove organizational baggage that constrains good feedback conversations, and elevate ongoing feedback and coaching. While there is debate about what type of performance management system works best (e.g., removing performance ratings or meeting quarterly instead of annually), everyone agrees that changing the performance management system will require a culture change.

Global Executive Coaching Survey 2016: Developing Leaders and Leadership Capabilities at all Levels
September 2016

Executive coaching is evolving to meet the needs of an emerging workplace in which boundaries are blurred, workers are overloaded, complexity increases, and everyone is addicted to the stimulation of technology. Additionally, retiring baby boomers mean a shortage of leaders. Executive coaching can imbue potential leaders with the skills they need to operate in this new environment. This report, with direction from the Executive Coaching Council of The Conference Board, features findings from a survey of 181 organizations globally and includes case studies highlighting the coaching practices of Google, MD Anderson, and other leading companies.

Digital Transformation: What Is It and What Does It Mean for Human Capital? (CHRO Business Implications)
July 2016

While many executives believe that digital transformation should be a strategic priority, few companies have fully implemented it. Lack of digital leadership and uneven familiarity with digital are common barriers. In fact, one recent survey found that human capital lags behind other functions in developing expertise in this area. But there’s an even more fundamental problem: many people have only a fuzzy concept of what digital transformation actually is. New research from The Conference Board defines digital transformation, describes its business impacts, and outlines its numerous implications for human capital. This report also pinpoints 10 questions CHROs can ask to identify digital transformation’s human capital implications for their own organizations.
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