INSIGHTS TO IMPACT:
FOSTERING EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19
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Introduction

Welcome to the first-ever YMCA WorkWell Community Well-Being Report. Before jumping into this research, we would like to take this opportunity to introduce ourselves, what we care about, and what we hope to accomplish with this report.

Meeting Our Changing Needs

For over 150 years, the YMCA has supported the needs of our communities in Guelph, Stratford-Perth, and Waterloo Region. You may know the Y because you took your first swimming lessons in one of our pools, attended one of our overnight camps, or took your first spin class at one of our Health and Wellness branches. We offer child care services for parents and guardians, deliver EarlyON programming, and provide newcomer services to integrate new Canadians into our communities and employment services to help community members find their first job or their next job.

Our communities are some of the fastest growing in Canada, and as people change and communities grow, our collective needs change too. At the YMCA, it has always been our goal to change along with you. Historically, we have been here to support the 400,000 employees in our communities outside of their working hours. However, research has increasingly shown that work has a significant impact on the health and well-being of our community members, and to satisfy our mission to support healthy communities, we need to meet our people where they are. It has become clear that we cannot have healthy communities without healthy workplaces.

Continuing our tradition of changing and growing, we are excited to announce a new program to support well-being in the workplace. WorkWell is a new team and service at the YMCA of Three Rivers with a clear mandate: Improve the state of workplace well-being in the communities we serve – and beyond.

We aim to create a positive impact in the workplace by generating data-driven insights on the well-being of our communities’ organizations and taking action through targeted training and behavioural change. Through this initiative, we will partner directly with local organizations to help them foster healthy and flourishing workplaces where every employee has an equal opportunity to thrive.
Why Start with a Community Report?

Our mandate is to improve workplace well-being in the communities we serve. To do that, we have to start by understanding where our communities need support the most. This report is an overview of the results from our first annual WorkWell Community Well-Being Survey – a survey on the state of workplace well-being in our communities.

This year, COVID-19 presented a clear and unique challenge to how we work, where we work, and the well-being of employees in our communities. The objective of this report is to provide a high-level illustration of how the pandemic has affected employee well-being, which areas have been impacted most significantly, and what organizations and leaders in our communities can start doing today to meet these challenges.

What Can You Expect Moving Forward?

Data is at the core of everything we do at WorkWell. We want to be your primary trusted source of information on workplace well-being, and to keep our finger on the pulse of workplace well-being in our communities, our goal is to release two reports each year: an annual YMCA WorkWell Community Well-Being Report each fall, identifying high-level trends in workplace well-being across local organizations, and a more targeted YMCA WorkWell Special Issue Report each winter to address specific issues impacting workplace well-being. This winter, our WorkWell Special Issue Report will dive into the relationship between Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives and workplace well-being.

COVID-19 has truly shaken the foundations of our communities, and workplace well-being has been one of many areas that have suffered as a result. No matter who you are or what your work experiences have been during COVID-19, we hope that you can find some value in this report. To restore the well-being of our communities’ employees, we need to be supporting each other in the most effective ways. We need to be tackling the problem with integrity, with compassion, with purpose, and with determination. We hope that this report can provide an important first step in that mission.

We’re here to help. We’re here for good.

- 

Jim Moss
Vice President,
YMCA WorkWell

Dave Whiteside, Ph.D.
Director of Insights
& Research
Workplace Well-Being in The Age of Covid-19

The growing importance of employee well-being has been one of the most significant organizational trends of the past decade – and why shouldn’t it be? On average, we spend 90,000 hours of our lives and 50% of our waking hours at work. Not only does this illustrate why the health of our workplaces is so integral to the health of our communities, but it also illustrates why it is so reasonable to desire a world where we can design our work experiences in ways that support our health and well-being.

In recent years, we have seen the idea of employee well-being begin to shift from something we long for to something we actively strive for. However, as we entered 2020, significant gaps still existed in practice. The significance of these gaps was highlighted perfectly by Deloitte’s 2020 Human Capital Trends Report, a survey of 9,000 business and HR leaders across 119 countries. 80% of leaders identified employee well-being as an important or very important priority for their organization’s success in 2020. No other trend ranked higher in perceived importance. However, only 12% of leaders believed that they were ready to adequately address employee well-being in their organizations, and only 21% actively sought opportunities to integrate well-being into the design of their work. Leaders were falling behind.

And then COVID-19 hit.

COVID-19 left an already underprepared workforce to face the most significant global pandemic in decades. This brought unprecedented levels of physical, mental, and financial health challenges to our communities. Unemployment skyrocketed, and the pandemic forced many of us to work from home en masse for the first time in history.

Social connection became virtual, and employers expected remote productivity while many employees were forced to work from home, juggling competing family and work priorities, often from inadequate workspaces like kitchen tables and couches. Others stayed on the front lines, continuing to serve our communities through long hours while battling personal and societal anxieties about the pandemic.

As the impacts of COVID-19 started to take root in homes and organizations across our communities, we took action. New challenges cannot be adequately addressed with old data, so we launched the WorkWell Community Well-Being Survey, a survey designed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the health and well-being of our communities’ workforce.

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80% of leaders identified employee well-being as an important or very important priority for their organization’s success in 2020.
The Workwell Community Well-Being Survey: An Overview

We collected feedback from 1,184 employees in the communities of Guelph, Stratford-Perth, and Waterloo Region between July 20 and August 20, 2020.

Our responses covered a wide range of work experiences across 20 different industries; 66% of respondents had worked entirely from home during the pandemic, while 20% of respondents had worked entirely from their place of work.

Respondents provided feedback about their work experience during COVID-19 across five areas that are directly linked to employee well-being. Each area was comprised of a specific subset of questions, outlined below:

**GENERAL WELL-BEING**
- General Well-Being
- Mental Health
- Physical Health
- Financial Health
- Familial Health

**WORKPLACE CULTURE**
- Trust
- Recognition
- Communication
- Feedback
- Upward Feedback
- Sense of Community

**WORKPLACE WELL-BEING**
- Stress Management
- Sense of Belonging
- Fulfillment
- Authenticity
- Clear Expectations

**ENGAGEMENT AT WORK**
- Engagement
- Inspiration
- Value Alignment
- Satisfaction
- Predicted Satisfaction

**JOB PERFORMANCE**
- Performance
- Mission Execution

All questions were self-report and asked on a 100-point scale, with higher scores indicating more positive responses and lower scores indicating more negative responses.

To help visualize and understand the data at a community level, we have categorized scores into four different groups:

**HEALTHY**
(77-100)
Scores are strong and indicate that work is having a positive effect on employee well-being.

**ADEQUATE**
(68-76)
Scores are acceptable, with no immediate threat of long-term concerns and no long-term benefits.

**AT RISK**
(61-67)
Scores are not detrimental, but they are at risk of teetering into more long-term concerns.

**UNHEALTHY**
(1-60)
Scores are detrimental, and suggest a long-term risk of burnout and well-being concerns.
Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now?

In order to understand the full impact of COVID–19 on the state of employee well-being in our communities today, it is important to understand where we have been. We compared our WorkWell Community Well–Being Survey responses to a similar sample of 1,198 employees working in our communities in late 2019.

This comparison demonstrated how impactful COVID–19 has been on the health and well–being of working adults. Let’s start with General Well–Being.

Before COVID–19, the data suggested that there was clear room for improvement in employee well–being in our communities. Twenty–three percent of employees responded with Unhealthy Well–Being scores – the threshold in our data which indicates a high risk for long–term chronic illness, burnout, and a chronic inability to manage stress. On the other hand, Healthy Well–Being scores were seen in more than 50% of respondents. This would suggest that rather than a complete shift in perspective, what our communities needed most was to fine–tune how well–being strategies were integrated into our organizations in order to ensure that they were more inclusive and more beneficial to a wider range of employees.

COVID–19, however, turned this finding on its head. By July, 63% of survey respondents indicated that COVID–19 has had a clear, negative impact on their well–being at work. This effect is underscored throughout our data: 46% of our respondents had Unhealthy scores in Well–Being – more than double the pre–COVID–19 number in just a matter of months, with an additional 8% of respondents At Risk of falling into the Unhealthy range. The percentage of employees with Healthy well–being scores also dropped significantly, down to 23% – less than half of pre–COVID–19 levels.

These differences provide early, but compelling evidence that COVID has changed the landscape of workplace well–being in our region. Not only has it affected how we work, but it has deeply affected our well–being at work as well. These changes, however, don’t stop at well–being. The following graphic illustrates how employee scores have changed across a number of key outcomes pre–COVID to now.

Figure 1. Employee Well–Being Pre–COVID vs. During COVID

These differences provide early, but compelling evidence that COVID has changed the landscape of workplace well–being in our region. Not only has it affected how we work, but it has deeply affected our well–being at work as well. These changes, however, don’t stop at well–being. The following graphic illustrates how employee scores have changed across a number of key outcomes pre–COVID to now.
This is early and compelling evidence that COVID–19 has quickly and drastically changed the landscape of work in our communities. Not only has it affected how we work, but it has directly affected our well-being at work as well. These changes, however, don’t stop at well-being. Figure 2 illustrates how average employee scores have declined across a number of key outcomes from late 2019 to now, during COVID–19.

In only a matter of months, average employee scores declined approximately 10–15 points across the board – a consistent, community-wide decline that our team has never seen on this scale.

Importantly, while the magnitude of these declines is relatively consistent, the practical implications of these declines can be quite different. For example, consider the decline in average **Engagement** scores compared to the decline in **Recognition** illustrated in Figure 2. Both declined 10–points from their pre–COVID–19 levels; however, Engagement declined from a Healthy score of 83 to an Adequate score of 73. That is, while Engagement scores experienced a significant decline, the majority of employees during COVID–19 have still not been experiencing levels of Engagement that are low enough to threaten their personal well-being.

Recognition, on the other hand, declined from an Adequate score of 70 to an Unhealthy score of 60, a decline which suggests that a significant proportion of employees in our communities are no longer receiving the recognition they need to maintain adequate levels of well-being at work.

In practice, this type of decline has serious implications for the health of employees, and was seen in four main areas: **Recognition**, **Communication**, **Feedback**, and **Well-Being** – with all four experiencing a significant 10–15 point decline from Adequate to Unhealthy scores. This finding points to a significant question in these findings: **How important is organizational culture in supporting well-being through crises?**
The Critical Role of Culture in Employee Well-Being

We define organizational culture as the quality of interactions that employees have with their leaders, their colleagues, and their organization. In the workplace, organizational culture has a critical and often undervalued role in supporting employee well-being. Strong cultures support the health of their employees by reducing uncertainty, providing healthy and constructive social connection, and helping people feel like they are valued members of something bigger than themselves.

COVID-19, however, has truly been a culture-changing event. It amplified employees’ need for a strong culture and burdened leaders’ capacity to foster and maintain one. Employees longed for clear communication more than ever. Expectations rapidly changed in a new world, questions of job security were top of mind as unemployment soared, and many employees lost the opportunity to simply approach their leader for clear feedback and quick answers.

Conversely, many leaders were forced to quickly adopt completely virtual communication for the first time ever. The tried-and-true water cooler method of connection was gone, the ability to read body language was lost, and Zoom calls tested our collective capacity for online empathy. On the front lines, stress ran high with leaders being pulled in so many new directions that their bandwidth for genuine connection and empathic communication dwindled.

Even the strongest workplace cultures have been tested by these challenges, and our results indicate that three particularly important components of culture have been impacted most significantly:

**RECOGNITION**
Whether employees feel as though they are appropriately appreciated for their work and their efforts on the job.

**COMMUNICATION**
Whether employees feel as though they receive communication that is clear, timely, and informative.

**FEEDBACK**
Whether employees feel as though they receive clear and timely feedback about their performance and what is expected of them.
Figure 3 illustrates how significantly these three components of healthy cultures have been affected by COVID-19 in our communities:

These results highlight the type of strain that cultures have faced. Approximately 50% of employees in our communities had Unhealthy scores in all three areas by July 2020, almost double that of late 2019. To be clear, these results alone are not an indictment of leaders in our communities. Leaders are only human, and even the best leaders have been left facing an unprecedented and ever-changing crisis for which there is no playbook. What these results do clearly demonstrate, however, is the magnitude of challenges that many organizations have felt – employees and leaders alike – and the impact that COVID-19 has had on organizational cultures.

Just what does this mean for workplace well-being in our communities? We refer to Recognition, Communication, and Feedback as the Foundations of Healthy Organizational Culture because they consistently demonstrate such a strong relationship with employee well-being and other key indicators of organizational health.

This recent data was no different – digging into the relationship between these three components of culture and employee well-being provides both cause for significant concern and inspiration to give us hope.
Figure 4 illustrates how employees with Healthy scores of Recognition, Communication, and Feedback compare on key well-being metrics to employees with Unhealthy scores.

These results are telling. On the one hand, employees experiencing an Unhealthy workplace culture during COVID–19 have also experienced significantly lower scores on Mental Health and Well–Being. They have been less able to effectively manage their stress, and have not received the sense of belonging that they need to maintain their general health at work. Where organizational cultures are suffering, employee well-being is almost certainly suffering alongside them.

Employees experiencing an Unhealthy workplace culture during COVID–19 have also experienced significantly lower scores on Mental Health and Well–Being. They have been less able to effectively manage their stress, and have not received the sense of belonging that they need to maintain their general health at work.

Importantly, however, comfort can be found in the other side of the story. Employees in Healthy cultures during COVID–19 have typically shown Healthy scores in well–being as well. Specifically, these employees scored significantly higher on Well–Being and Mental Health, experienced trusting and valuable relationships at work, and were better able to manage the stressors of COVID–19 in their working lives. At a time when our communities are suffering, these results provide hope that there are actions leaders and organizations can take to protect the well–being of their teams.

Overall, COVID–19 has had a deep and far–reaching impact on the social and economic health of our communities. Let us be clear that it would be reckless to suggest that addressing organizational culture would solve all of these concerns. However, our data does suggest that healthy organizational cultures – cultures where leaders have been able to maintain effective and timely recognition, communication, and feedback – have provided an important buffer to insulate employee well–being throughout the pandemic.
The Bright Spots

Figure 5 presents the complete breakdown of all responses across all drivers of our survey.

This visualization illustrates just how much work we need to do to restore employee well-being in our communities – particularly in the areas of employee well-being, employee health, and organizational culture – where in many cases, the proportion of employees with Unhealthy scores actually exceeded the proportion of employees with Healthy scores.

It also illustrates areas of hope, with some rare bright spots that should not be taken for granted as we set our sights on rebuilding a healthy community – both in the workplace and at home. For example, 72% of respondents still demonstrated Healthy or Adequate levels of Engagement, 70% still felt a high level of Value Alignment with their organization, and 69% still believed that their organization is successfully executing its mission.

What these results demonstrate is that many working adults in our communities still feel engaged by their work and genuinely care about their organization and its mission.

Particularly during a pandemic, where how we work both at home and on the front lines has changed so much, this is not something that organizations should take for granted. Especially in the face of so much uncertainty and job insecurity, work is a critical component in so many people’s lives, and the survey responses suggest that employees in our communities want to contribute in positive ways. It is now up to organizations to provide the right environments with the right foundations so their employees can be healthy again.

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A Call to Action - Where Do We Start?

Understanding where employees are struggling is an important first step to tackling these issues, but our WorkWell mandate is not to simply generate insights on workplace well-being; it is to improve workplace well-being in our communities. With this in mind, the next critical step in this process is to clearly identify what leaders can start doing today to start to address employee well-being so we can restore well-being to pre-COVID-19 levels where needed, and continue to protect well-being in organizations that have weathered the storm.

We acknowledge that employees themselves have an important role in their personal well-being; however, the most impactful workplace well-being initiatives start at the top. In the workplace, it is leaders who determine what is possible, what is acceptable, and what is supported. Without clear support from leadership, many employee well-being initiatives do not even have an opportunity to take off. That is why this section is focused primarily on identifying what leaders can start doing today to tend to the well-being of their employees.

To help identify these opportunities, our WorkWell Community Well-Being Survey asked respondents to identify what they believed they needed most in the next three months in order to feel like they could be healthy and high-performing at work. Figure 6 illustrates the most commonly identified needs in our communities.

Building off of these needs, here are four things that leaders can start doing today to improve the well-being of their employees in the coming months.

![Figure 6. Most common employee needs broken out by percentage of respondents identifying each need](image)
Provide Flexibility and Control

Less than a year ago, the ability to work from home was a perk. Employees could craft their schedules in a way that worked for them and their needs. However, the novel challenges of COVID-19 have meant that working from home is a far cry from the perk that it once was. Put simply: **working from home is not a perk when it is mandatory.** This distinction was demonstrated quite clearly in our data: 66% of respondents continued to work entirely from home five months into COVID-19, and yet 53% of employees working from home, and 49% of all respondents cited a need for more flexibility in the next three months to help maintain their well-being and mental health at work – the most commonly cited need in our community.

As work-from-home policies became a mandate for many employees, our understanding of what constitutes “flexible work-from-home policies” has changed. This is because every employee’s work-from-home experience brought its own unique challenges. Many employees have fought to maintain productivity while trying to support their families, stay connected with limited Internet capabilities, educate their children, and/or trying to work from inadequate workstations such as couches and kitchen tables. There simply is no one-size-fits-all approach given the wide range of challenges many employees have faced working from home during COVID-19.

We saw evidence of these challenges in the data as well: Figure 7 compares the General Well-Being and Mental Health of those working from home and those working from their workplace during COVID-19. The most striking takeaway from these results is how similar these two groups are, despite both groups having significantly different work experiences. It is clear, however, that working from home during COVID-19 has been anything but a perk, and new solutions are required to address these challenges.
There is a clear place to start, however, and that is **people's need for control**. The ability to work from home used to be considered a perk because it allowed employees to bend their work around their life. They could choose to stay home when a child was sick or take an important doctor’s appointment during the middle of the day. While deadlines and productivity were still critical, the ability to work from home allowed employees to support their own mental health by giving them the opportunity to engage with their work in a way that worked for their own needs. During COVID-19, however, this sense of control was lost. Working from home was no longer a “flexible option” as work crept into the home because it had to, not because employees wanted it to, and this has had important ramifications for employees’ mental health.

The need for flexible work arrangements has not been limited to those working from home. While much of the COVID-19 narrative has focused on the shift to working from home, many employees have continued to face rigid, in-person shift work, inflexible jobs, and immovable schedules, all while having to manage their concern for families at home and the anxieties of potentially contracting the virus at work. Similar to those working from home, approximately 50% of those working from their workplace during COVID-19 had Unhealthy scores in General Well-Being and Mental Health, and 34% cited a need for more flexible work arrangements to improve their health at work.

Overall, the **need for more flexible work arrangements** was the most commonly cited need across all groups and employee types. To adequately address this need, leaders need to revisit the ways in which work has historically been inflexible and consider how they can begin to change their approach to tend to the long-term well-being of employees, particularly by considering how to provide employees with more control over how they choose to work.
While there are many ways to provide employees with flexible work arrangements, here are some ideas to help leaders start to make changes today:

1. **Prioritize deliverables over hours spent at work.** Mandating strict hours of work creates inflexible structures that can be detrimental to employee well-being during difficult times.
   
   Where possible, focusing on deliverables over hours spent at work allows employees to create a work-life that works for them and provides equal flexibility across different employee groups.
   
   For example, some parents might prefer to focus on their children in the early mornings and late afternoons and work additional hours after their children are in bed. Some employees might prefer to structure their workday around when public transit is most accessible, others might choose to stick to the more traditional 9-5 structure.
   
   What is important is that, where possible, employees have the choice to structure their work and meet their clear deliverables in a way that works for them and their own unique needs.

2. **Offer a flexible well-being stipend.**
   
   Many health benefits are well-intentioned in theory, but inflexible in practice. For example, gym membership subsidies may support the well-being of some employees, but can fall short for others who prefer to exercise at home.
   
   Flexible stipends, on the other hand, offer employees a valuable level of control. An open-ended well-being stipend (e.g. $500 that employees can direct to any costs associated with their well-being) allows employees to cover the costs of their own, unique well-being needs.
   
   Some employees might use those funds to subsidize their gym membership, whereas others may improve their workstation (a need identified by 37% of employees working from home) or secure additional childcare support (a need identified by 33% of working parents).
   
   What is important is that employees have the choice to use the subsidy in a way that works best for their own needs.

This type of flexibility presents a significant departure from the norm for many organizations, but the challenges of COVID-19 have only served to illustrate how valuable it can be.

Forty-nine per cent of all employees have clearly identified flexibility as a critical need for their well-being in the next three months, and finding clear ways to incorporate control and choice into how they deliver their work will help give employees the mental resources they need to be their best at work as our communities recover.
In prior sections, we discussed the critical importance of the foundations of culture in supporting employee well-being. These cultural foundations were identified as some of the most significant workplace needs for employees in our communities. Figure 8 shows five of the top ten needs identified by respondents and speaks to a significant need in our communities for healthy organizational cultures where employees experience regular and effective Recognition, Communication, and Feedback.

Importantly, these behaviours do not need to carry significant costs; but by regularly devoting energy and effort into these areas, leaders can address employee well-being head-on by minimizing uncertainty, providing clear direction, and helping them feel like valued members of their organization.

“We are working from home, constantly on Zoom meetings and the email communication with cc: on everything is exhausting. Many of us are paranoid that we will lose our jobs. This was a low trust environment before COVID–19, but it is only worse now and our weak culture is showing.”
– Married mother of one, Director, working from home
Here are some clear suggestions to promote effective recognition, communication, and feedback in the workplace:

1. **Timely communication is the best communication.** One of the most common cultural challenges we hear is that employees do not get critical information when they need it. This is even more damaging when employees receive critical information through informal gossip or back channels. Whether it is important organizational decisions, recognition of a job well done, or critical feedback on a project, effective communication has a half-life. The best cultures focus less on waiting to craft the “perfect” communication, and more on creating timely dialogue that is inclusive and timely.

2. **Be specific and explain the why.** Feeling like a valued member of something bigger than yourself is one of the strongest predictors of mental health at work. To help employees understand their worth, context is critical. By explaining the why, leaders bring others into their decisions and demonstrate the importance of their team. For example, “we made this decision because...”, “your efforts have been so important to this team because...”, “I am looking for more from you here because...”. The why provides clarity and direction, but most importantly, it communicates meaning, one of the critical building blocks to healthy cultures.

3. **Recognize the effort as much as the outcome.** One of the biggest mistakes we see with recognition is the belief that only the outcome deserves appreciation. This overlooks the reality, however, that the bulk of the work often goes into the process rather than the outcome. Recognize small milestones along the way – say “thank you” by identifying why employees’ efforts are important, and why their contributions are valuable. Increasing these positive touchpoints also provides additional opportunities for constructive feedback and direction along the way. Stop waiting for the final product, and actively look for the moments that deserve appreciation along the way.

4. **Confirm they understand.** What leaders say and what they mean isn’t always what is heard. Effective communication is clear and concise, and requires empathy from the speaker as much as it does from the listener. To help ensure that both parties are on the same page, leaders can ask the listener to repeat what they heard, to raise any thoughts or concerns that they might have, and to identify areas that require clarification. Communication is a two-way street, and some of the most important work happens after the message is delivered.

On the surface, many of us know that these are important leader behaviours. In our experience, however, significant gaps between knowledge and practice exist at all levels – executives, directors, managers, and team leaders. Remember: just because it is common sense does not mean that it is a common action, and in times of crisis, these gaps have an even more significant impact on the well-being of employees. Healthy cultures create the conditions for healthy employees, but they require active and consistent effort. It all begins with the little behaviours.
Mental Health Supports

One of the most common threads throughout these results is the significant impact of COVID–19 on Mental Health in our communities, regardless of industry, employment type, and demographics.

There is a clear cause for concern: 47% of respondents had Unhealthy Mental Health scores, and 30% cited a need for more Mental Health Supports to feel healthier at work in the next three months. Likely, these numbers will only continue to climb as the long–term effects of COVID–19–related stress and uncertainty continue to drag on into the winter months.

It is important to clarify that this is not only a workplace issue. COVID–19 has affected mental health in our communities in many ways – however, it is undeniable that:

(1) our changing job demands and work experiences have played a big role in how mental health has evolved in our communities during the pandemic, and

(2) organizations can play a critical role in supporting mental health in our communities.

My physical health has been good but there has been a ton of anxiety and stress – about how I'm performing at work and if I'm adding enough value, concern about my child's well–being and social isolation, concern about my partner's job and their well–being and mental health, worry about elderly parents, etc. It doesn’t seem to end.”
- Married mother of one, working at home
Here are some important suggestions on what leaders, managers, and supervisors can do to support their teams through the next stages of the pandemic:

1. **Workload and time management matter.** Unmanageable demands were one of the most frequently mentioned challenges in the data, with many respondents stating that COVID–19 led to increased demands with fewer resources and smaller teams. As a manager or leader, it is important to clearly identify your top priorities so employees know where their limited resources should be focused. Assume that your employees are operating with a lower mental bandwidth than normal; connect with employees to discuss their workload, whether they feel able to meet their objectives, and what specifically you can do as a leader to support them.

2. **Support mental health through physical activity.** Physical exercise has many benefits in supporting mental health – it can help to improve self–esteem, decrease negative thoughts, and improve overall well-being. Consider leading by example; where possible, take physically distanced team walks or have walking meetings with a team member. If you are working remotely, consider virtual walking meetings where parties call in while walking around the block. This active change of scenery has proven benefits, and even simple exercise brings much–needed oxygen into our brain. Leaders should lead by example and demonstrate how this type of activity is not only acceptable, but encouraged.

3. **Start with empathy and honesty.** Be careful not to gloss over the realities that exist on your team. Be honest and transparent – the stigma of mental health is only amplified if you try to act as if “everything is fine” when your team is struggling. By sharing your own concerns and struggles, you can build trust and signal that it is acceptable to discuss these issues. Make the time for regular check–ins to understand employees’ needs and create an anonymous channel for employees to voice their needs and concerns if needed. You will likely not be able to address every concern, but knowing what these needs are is an absolutely critical first step.

4. **Clearly communicate what services are provided through your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** A recent industry trends report found that only 7% of employees use the services provided through their EAP. As a leader, there are many things you can do to increase usage in your organization. First, provide a resource that clearly states the full breadth of services your EAP offers and why those services are valuable, and offer a step–by–step guide on how to access them. Second, create a dedicated email address that employees can reach out to for help in accessing their EAP. There are many personal reasons why someone might not reach out to an EAP, but as a leader, it is up to you to provide information on what your EAP provides, how it can be accessed, and why it can be so important.

5. **Educate yourself and your employees.** To best support mental health in the workplace, it is important to understand the basics and how employees might be feeling when they consider returning to the workplace. The Canadian Mental Health Association has created a fantastic toolkit for leaders and employees alike. This is a great place to start. Having this framework will help you empathize with and support people who may need help. **Access the Toolkit online.**
Addressing Mental Health in the workplace is a significant challenge. While mental health supports like an EAP can be valuable tools in an organization’s arsenal, true change only begins when leaders clearly and openly take mental health seriously.

The best well-being strategies at work are holistic, leveraging mental health supports to complement a healthy culture with clear communication around the importance of mental health and regular check-ins to understand the most significant challenges faced by employees.

While mental health is the product of many considerations in someone’s life, it is time for organizations to fully own their share of the responsibility in mental health in our communities.
Understand Your Employees’ Unique Needs

These results represent 1,200 employees across a wide range of organizations, industries, and demographics, but it is important to stress that these results might not be indicative of the unique needs within your organization. For example, 18% of respondents identified a clear need for more Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives to feel healthy at work. However, that need could exist across 100% of employees within your organization, or 100% of BIPOC employees within your organization. These numbers simply represent clear goalposts for you to work from, but to effectively target well-being in your own organization, you need to clearly identify the unique needs of your employees.

The best way to identify the needs of your employees is to directly involve them in the process. To do this effectively, there are a number of important criteria that should be addressed:

1. Ensure that employee surveys or feedback mechanisms clearly assess employee well-being. The most significant employee needs in the COVID-19 world are rarely addressed by the big, annual engagement survey. If you want to understand and support the well-being needs of your employees, it's critical to clearly and directly measure them. If you are not collecting the right data, your hands will be tied before you even start.

2. Ensure there is a quick turnaround in the feedback process. Change is constant in organizations, and this has been particularly true during COVID-19. This means that data can become stale quickly, and if you are waiting even a month to process and receive employee feedback, the opportunity to create positive change might be lost. The feedback process needs to be nimble so you can be nimble in your action.

3. Ensure that you close the loop quickly. After you have received employee feedback, it is critical to quickly communicate to employees what you heard and how you plan to act to support their needs.

As with any data-driven approach, the clearest first step leaders can take in supporting employee well-being is to understand the unique needs of their own employees to ensure that interventions are directly targeting their employees’ actual needs. Long-term, this process is also a powerful way to build a healthy, trusting culture. By building a strategy around regular employee feedback, leaders can ensure that they are basing their decisions on actual needs rather than their assumptions.
Our Next Steps as WorkWell

In the coming months, our team at WorkWell will release additional infographics based on some of the nuances in our data. For example, new infographics and insights will be released on the workplace well-being of working parents, part-time employees, and different age groups during COVID-19. Please visit our landing page for the first infographic on what employees can do to support their well-being in the coming months.

This winter, we will gather more insights and release our first **WorkWell Special Issue Report** on the relationship between Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and workplace well-being – specifically examining how employees with different ethnicities, identities, and backgrounds experience work and workplace well-being in our communities.

In the meantime, we are here to help. Our WorkWell team offers data-driven insights, webinars, workshops, and professional development opportunities to help your team tackle workplace well-being head-on. Even pre-COVID-19, only 12% of leaders felt that they were ready to adequately address employee well-being, despite 80% of leaders believing that it was an important priority for their organization. COVID-19 has only widened this gap, but you do not have to be helpless. You just have to be intentional.

For more information on how we can help you and your team visit our website, thisisy.ca/workwell or email workwell@ckw.ymca.ca.

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INTRODUCING: WORKWELL INSIGHTS

YMCA WorkWell offers a quick, 20-question assessment to help leaders gain insights on employee Well-Being, Culture, Engagement, and Performance.

Our goal is to quickly turn Insights into Action, and we will have your full report in your hands with an action-oriented debrief in just ten days. Visit our website to learn more.