Workplace Wellbeing-IA Interior Architects

Through our work at IA Interior Architects, we have observed that ‘Wellbeing,’ defined as the encompassment of the environmental, the physical, and the mental, is becoming the new standard for the healthy workplace. The traditional values of sustainability and wellness are being rolled up under this expanded definition. While this is overall for the better there are some cautionary moments as organizations move into this space.

In the name of productivity

As the Industrial Revolution took hold several hundred years ago there was a fundamental shift in how work was done. The clock became the primary agent of measurement for productivity and the regulation of the work day. This was a somewhat foreign and heretofore unknown system of work which did not align with how our bodies and minds had originally evolved to function.

Work was also less consistent and regularized in the past. There were a greater variety of tasks performed throughout the day and a wider variation in overall activities both physical and mental. This gave people the opportunity to both move throughout the day in addition to varying their level of cognitive engagement.

There is no doubt that the Industrial Revolution propelled us forward as a society and was inevitable as a part of our evolution. However, in hindsight there was some collateral damage. This could not be foreseen at the time as knowledge of the workings of the body and mind were not sufficiently advanced to understand what was really happening. People were forced to function in ways that while great for efficiency and production were not very good for overall wellbeing. Work was systemized around both repetitive tasks and the clock both of which are not really part of how the human brain and body are wired.

We now find ourselves at a crossroads. Society is in a position to look at some of what happened along the road and consider some course corrections.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing by strict definition is ‘the state of being happy, healthy or successful’. The current workplace definition that you often hear is ‘the fusion of the physical, cognitive and social aspects of work offering a broader perspective on organizational effectiveness’. Another more technical term for this you might hear is ‘holistic ergonomics’. While it could be argued that the emotional health of the employee is not the employer’s responsibility there is a strong case to be made for the taking heed of this in light of its effects on productivity and overall workforce satisfaction.

The mind

As we consider wellbeing in addition to wellness, one of the aspects of this expanded line of thinking is our mental welfare. It is no longer enough to simply take care of a person’s physical needs; it is important to consider their emotional state as well. While this may sound a bit too ‘new age’ there are some real reasons to take it seriously.
Sitting is the new smoking

Over the past several years the media has started to take notice of a growing body of research that has been documenting the negative effects of an overly sedentary lifestyle. While this was probably known intuitively, think about how you feel if you have been sitting all day. As a result to this new way of thinking, there has been a recent increase in research which has been documenting it in detail.

Homo sapiens evolved to be in a state of general movement throughout the day. In fact from an evolutionary perspective, the Industrial Revolution, which really started us down the road towards a more sedentary work life, represents the smallest fraction of our existence as a species; about one one-thousandth of one percent which is nowhere near enough time for a Darwinian adjustment.

Transitioning from a fully seated workday to a combination of sitting, standing and moving can help to mitigate the ill effects. Research says that you should start by trying to spend at least two hours per day in periodic chunks standing or moving at work with the goal of working up to half the workday.

Time is the new money

Currently business is existing in at the intersection of two worlds; the Industrial Age and the Participation age. The industrial age has a clear model; trading of time for money. The participation age’s hallmarks are participation and sharing. The participation age workforce desires to make meaning at work not just money.

Participation age companies are discovering that if they invite everyone to participate in the building of a great company and to share in the rewards, both the company and the people profit more. Participation age companies strive to create a workplace with a soul. This may sound a bit too ‘soft’ for some but there are a growing number of case studies documenting the success of this shift.

There are detractors to this new models but the reality is simple. Give people control over their time and they will build a great company, not for you, but with you.

Why do we care?

According to Gallup’s ‘State of the American Workplace’ report 30% of the workforce is actively engaged and inspired at work, 52% are present but not fully engaged and 18% are actively disengaged and looking to make a change. If these numbers are even close to correct there is well more than half the workforce that could benefit from greater engagement. Imagine if you were to pull only 10% of the disengaged back into the fold. The economic gain could be enormous across an enterprise. Making the workplace more supportive of wellbeing has been shown to contribute to greater engagement.

There is a risk management component to this discussion. Some of our clients have described scenarios in which they are concerned that an employee can hold them accountable for a back condition or some other ailment for not putting in place the proper workplace and associated policies to support a healthy lifestyle.

Setting aside the potential financial gains and legal exposure, being concerned with employees’ health and wellbeing is fundamentally the ethical thing to do. While we can discuss the economics and productivity improvements which might be the motivating factors that would spur adoption at a base level, caring for our people is a core moral issue.
Leadership

If an organization wants to promote a culture of wellbeing the leadership at the highest levels needs to participate. It is not enough to put the programs in place and leave them to the constituents to utilize. The leadership needs to be active in the program to demonstrate the organizations true commitment. This does not necessarily have to be a big time commitment on the part of the C-suite. Being visible at organization events or using the wellness amenities occasionally can be enough to spur the organization on.

One of the other management challenges centers on distributing the message down to group and department leadership. Even if the senior leaders are on board the other managers in the organization need to follow suit, joining and supporting the effort. This can be a challenge in some cases but it is not something that cannot be overcome.

For tech only?

These kinds of programs have been historically associated with tech companies and some organizations say ‘we are not Google, that is not for us’ but this seems to be a short sighted point of view. The priorities of the workforce in general are shifting as the next generation of employees becomes established.

Do your homework

It is no surprise that given how popular this movement is there are many avenues to choose all represented by their individual experts some of which are move valid and beneficial than others. Before embarking on the development of a program it is important to carefully evaluate those practices that make for good long term programs and those that are just the flavor of the month. When researching targeting physicians from well-established institutions as a starting to point can lead to solid information.

Another aspect of this to consider is whether a program is voluntary or not. If the program is voluntary there are limited legal issues. If it is a mandatory program there are a host of things that need to be considered such as alternatives for older or disabled employees, HIPAA compliance and others. There are also limits on shifting of insurance burdens to employees based on participation that need to be understood. Incentive participation cannot exceed 30% of the cost of coverage for example.

Doing homework in these areas is not only good common sense and the right thing to do but also can be a good shield for some liability.

You can’t force it.

For all the benefits of programs like these people cannot feel as though they are being forced into them. There have to be good incentives for participation but it cannot be too heavy handed or penalize those who cannot or maybe even do not wish to participate. A program that feels forced has a lower likelihood of success.

In conclusion

Wellbeing is really a philosophy around which behaviors, actions, programs and spaces can be constructed. Understanding what it means at its core is the first step and is fundamental to the building of a culture of wellbeing in an organization. These are not just formal programs but philosophies of management that allow people to find balance in their lives. From there all of the other things follow.