

Culture Eats Well-Being for Breakfast

In today's organisations, prioritising workplace well-being has become essential as employers dedicate resources for mental health support, Employee Assistance Programs, digital wellness tools and resilience training being a few. On a policy level, governments have bolstered protections through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which defend employees facing mental health issues by preventing discrimination, ensuring reasonable accommodations, and providing protected leave (U.S. EEOC, 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Yet, burnout, stress, psychological disengagement and psychological strain is rising across sectors, despite the structural measures. This persistent gap between policy and lived experiences underscores a central insight: well-being depends not on policies or programs but on culture, embodying the spirit of "culture eats well-being for breakfast."



Organisational culture shaped by shared norms, leadership behaviours, communication patterns and unspoken expectations has a far greater influence on employee well-being than formal HR initiatives. Employees pay more attention to what leaders do each day than to what policies promise on paper. This is why even well-designed programs can fall flat undermined by culture inconsistencies. A company might offer mindfulness sessions while rewarding overwork, encourage employees to "speak up" while managers respond defensively, or provide mental health days that employees hesitate to use. When culture clashes with policy, policy loses.

The ADA provides a clear example of this tension. Legally, employees with mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, or bipolar disorder can request accommodations like flexible schedules, telework, or task adjustments. In practice, these rights depend on whether employees feel psychologically safe enough to disclose their condition in the first place. In cultures where stigma or scepticism prevails, employees fear being viewed as weak, leading to an avoidance to seek accommodations that they are legally entitled to. Managerial attitudes additionally compound the issue as in high pressure or low trust environments, subtle questioning of accommodation requests by supervisors, opportunity limitation or micromanagement. These behaviours deter employees from using their protections.

FMLA protections often face similar cultural barriers. Although the FMLA grants up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for serious mental health conditions, many employees hesitate to take it due to workplace expectations of constant availability, this is referred to as presenteeism (Johns, 2010). Concerns about career impacts, burden on colleagues or perception about reduced commitment frequently drive employees to shorten leave, return early or avoid applying at the first place. Again, the culture is what becomes the decisive factor.

Yoga classes, wellness apps and workshops cannot compensate for chronic overload, low psychological safety or leadership styles that discourage open and vulnerable conversations. Rather when employees understand this mismatch between well-being policies and everyday reality the scepticism adds to the psychological load and leads to further disengagement. Ultimately the effectiveness of ADA, FMLA, or other initiatives rests on creating a workplace culture that reinforces the policy. When well-being becomes a priority it changes from distant policy rhetoric to a lived reality of the employees.

At YWP; we aspire to spread awareness towards enhancing employee wellbeing and productivity. We as an organization work consistently towards supporting corporates in wellbeing workshops.

✨ Join us to make workplaces healthier and more productive for employees.

Reach out to us at workplacewellbeingbyywp@gmail.com with any queries or collaboration ideas.

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