

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Workplace well-being is a team sport with Dr. Richard Safeer

Jen Fisher (Jen): Hi WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human-centered workplace. And as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into postpandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

Many organizations have perks and programs designed to enhance employee wellness, but these efforts often miss the mark in actually boosting worker well-being. So, what can organizations do to make meaningful progress in creating a happier, healthier, and more resilient workforce? The answer lies in culture.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be with you today to talk about all things well-being. I'm here with Dr. Richard Safeer. He currently serves as the chief medical director of employee health and well-being for Johns Hopkins Medicine. He also teaches in the Department of Health, Behavior, and Society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Dr. Safeer is a regular conference speaker on the topic of building a culture of health and well-being and has published numerous journal articles on the topic, as well as the book *A Cure for the Common Company: A Well-Being Prescription for a Happier, Healthier, and More Resilient Workforce*.

Rich, welcome to the show. It's so great to have you and I want to start the way I start with all of my guests, and really understand how you became so passionate about this topic of workplace well-being.

Rich Safeer (Rich): Thank you, Jen. I'm happy to share that story. I was a practicing family doctor for about a year, when I kind of got tired, emotionally exhausted, didn't feel like I was making a difference. This had to be 25 years ago or so, and we didn't call it burnout at the time. And I felt like my patients were rushing in to the office during the workday and then rushing out, and neither of us had time to stop and really look at what were the root causes of their illnesses and how could I help them build new skills and better and healthier practices, so that they didn't have to take their prescription medicines and it got me to thinking that I needed to find a different path for my own professional well-being. And when I realized that my patients were spending 15 to 30 minutes with me, but 2,000 hours a year in the workplace, I quickly understood that I needed to work for a company to help their employees and help the organization. That's how I found my path.

Jen: So, you're kind of one of the OGs in the industry.

Rich: An accidental OG, probably suffering from my own job, to be frank.

Jen: I think that there's perhaps many of us in this industry that have fallen in that category and had to find a different path and feel so deeply about helping others not get where we got right.

Rich: Jen, I was lucky that I studied nutrition in college, though that first year a big part of what I was seeing with my patients was that they weren't making the best food choices and that they weren't moving enough. I was very conscious of that because of my undergraduate education. And so, in some way it was an OG experience, because of my own job not meeting my needs, but in other ways like, I'm so grateful for my college education, because it helped me see a path forward.

Jen: Absolutely, and I think that insights or recognition of the impact that nutrition has on our overall well-being in a lot of cases is unfortunately overlooked or perhaps said differently, is so confusing to people, especially now we just don't know what choices to make.

Rich: Yeah, consumers, employees, citizens, whatever you want to call each and every one of us, we are overwhelmed with messages and they're not always true or completely true. And it's pretty challenging.

Jen: Absolutely. So, I want to take a step back here and learn from you, because there are many different...kind of, along the same lines, there are many different definitions of well-being. Perhaps none of them are wrong or better than another, but there are many different definitions. And so, let's start with how you define it.

Rich: Jen, I talk about this very issue of definitions in the introductions of my book. I start with the definition of health as defined by the World Health Organization, and then I get into wellness and well-being. And where I've arrived is that well-being to me is a lifelong journey that ebbs and flows and heads toward an optimal state of health. I also ask everyone to give each other forgiveness, if people use these words interchangeably. All too often, some of our discussions, at least in the employer world, get bogged down in wellness versus well-being and it really keeps us from moving forward to a productive outcome that benefits everyone who works in that organization.

Jen: Absolutely. I have that experience myself and I actually used to kind of be a stickler about the definition between well-being and wellness, and I think I have come to recognize and appreciate that as long as somebody is taking positive steps along the journey, then it doesn't necessarily matter what we call it.

Rich: Yeah. And flexibility is a well-being strategy and so when we're flexible with each other and appreciate each other's definitions, it really makes for an easier day.

Jen: Absolutely. So why do we need well-being at work? And perhaps, you know, this question coming from me feels a little bit rhetorical, but explain to me, in terms of your own point of view, why do we need well-being at work and why should organizations care about this?

Rich: Well, Jen, first, it's a real pleasure to be on your podcast, because I appreciate our shared origin and I also appreciate our shared roles in our organizations. We spend most of our waking hours with our colleagues and in our workplace, and if we don't include well-being during the workday, then our chances of finding optimal health and happiness are pretty small. It's not just the individuals who

benefit, it's also the organizations. As we've seen from the last few years, employees are leaving their jobs in record numbers, because they're not happy with where they're working, and a large part of that is the way they feel or don't feel that their employer is taking care of them. I'll also say that it's more than just retention, it's also about attracting talent, because when employers take care of their employees, the employees feel good about it. They tell their friends, their family, and word starts to spread through the community. We're all familiar with people who have said, oh yeah, that company, that's a great company to work for. I hear they have a lot of fun there. And just the opposite, oh no, don't work there, it's a really toxic workplace. These kind of conversations are happening all over the place. And you want to be the company where people want to work.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. Do you think that, you know, just kind of reflecting on some of the more current news and news cycle about softening of the economy and various organizations that are reducing their workforce. Do you think that's going to change things? It's certainly a worry of mine that, you know, organizations and leaders that have had well-being so top of mind for many reasons over the past few years, but what are your thoughts on that?

Rich: Yeah, unfortunately, a lot of organizations see well-being as a cyclical part of their company's financial health. And I would not be surprised if some organizations cut back in this area, but I obviously think it's a mistake. Some organizations look at it as a cost, whereas they'd be better served to look at it as an investment. I mean, there's plenty of studies to show that when organizations embrace employee health and well-being as a shared value, that they're going to be much more financially successful. It's just that some companies and leaders have a hard time looking past the next financial quarter and it's really to the detriment of the long-term success of their organization.

Jen: I obviously couldn't agree more to that. But when we talk about, you know, we talk about this need for well-being at work. Can you walk me through what that looks like in your mind, because I also think there's some misconceptions there that well-being at work is, yoga at 2:00 PM. And while yoga at 2:00 PM, by no means is a bad thing. That's not really what we're talking about here.

Rich: No, not really. And it's really just a few percentage of the population that can take advantage of resources like that, right. I wish I was doing yoga at 2:00 PM today. Really, it's a matter of integrating well-being into our work processes and our day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute interactions and approach to the workday. And so, to me well-being is about not just an individual endeavor, but an organizational, intentional effort toward building a well-being culture, where well-being is part of the organization's fabric. I happen to believe that there are six crucial well-being culture building blocks that, when used to their full potential, create that well-being culture where it's easier for everyone to have a happy and healthy day.

Jen: Absolutely. I love the six building blocks, so can you walk us through what those are?

Rich: Oh, sure. And I'm going to give everyone an acronym. So if you want to remember this, you have a fighting chance at remembering it. So the phrase that we're going to work from is plan for success. And the first building block is for the P in plan, it stands for peer support. This is about the way our coworkers support both our healthy habits and our positive emotions or they might do just the opposite. They might thwart our efforts to maintain our healthy habits, and they actually might be working against our mental health. The second building block starts with the letter L, the L in plan, and that stands for leadership engagement. Not just leadership support, but leadership engagement. And so,

the leaders are playing an active role and there's plenty of different categories within leadership engagement alone. The third building block is norms. Norms are the expected behaviors of a group of people that has something in common. The N in plan stands for norms. And so, in a workplace, there's often healthy norms, like walking together at break time, and there's often unhealthy norms like checking emails after work hours are done or on weekends. So that's the word plan. And then the small word for the last word in the phrase success. The first S in success is social climate. The social climate is the way we feel about the people we work with. Do we feel good about working with these people? Do we feel like we're a true team where we can collaborate? We trust each other. We can have a good time together. The two C's in success stand for culture connection points. These culture connection points are like nudges. What can the employer do to make it easier for employees to make healthy choices and have a positive emotional day. I have like a dozen of those different culture connection points in the book. And the last S in success, is for shared values. I referred to this earlier, companies have core values, and those are usually decided by the executive team or the board of directors, and they often speak to what's good for the company, but leave out what's good for the employees. So I recommend that organizations have core values that are shared by both management and employees and that they include some variation of employee health and well-being, because then you'll know that the organization is making their day-to-day decisions based on core values, including health and well-being. So, that's plan for success.

Jen: Got it. So how do we convince organizations and organizational leaders that having a shared value around workforce well-being contributes to the resilience of an organization. I know resilience, you know, is top of mind for many business leaders. We talked about the softening of the economy and building resilient organizations. And when I see that, I often notice that this whole notion of workforce well-being is missing, but it is a huge factor of what contributes to the resilience of an organization.

Rich: So Jen, the question about shared values and how leaders could embrace the notion of including employee health and well-being could really be answered through Richard Barrett's book, *The Value Driven Organization*. It's a great book, and Richard Barrett goes through the science of how organizations that include values that demonstrate caring for the employees are much more successful on many different levels, including financial success, when compared to those organizations that have values that really resonate for the organization and the management instead of the employees. So that's a book I recommend people take a look at. When it comes to resilience, I absolutely agree that you can't find resilience without a well-being strategy. And it can't be left to the employees alone. Well-being is a team sport. Everyone needs to be on board to make well-being in the workplace work. Let me give you an example. Resilience depends on our ability to trust those people around us and to know that our team has our back. Managers would be well served to create opportunities where employees can get to know each other as people and not just fellow employees. That means some good old-fashioned events or whatever social platforms you want to use to have people get to know if their coworker has a dog, where they live, what their hobbies are. This kind of connection improves trust, which improves resilience. There's several other ingredients, as you know, Jen, to resilience, and managers and leaders need to be part of creating the opportunities to build that resilience.

Jen: Give me an example of how they would do that, because I think a lot of times, you know, a historical point of view, a dated point of view in many ways is that these are the types of activities and things that happen outside of work, or at least happen outside of the workday.

Rich: You know it used to not be that way. I remember going to the company picnic at my dad's company many years when I was a kid and they had a softball game and all these different ways for not just the employees to socialize with each other, but for employees to meet their coworkers, families, and it was a great feeling. Now it doesn't have to revert back to the company picnic, but we do need to find opportunities to socialize with each other. It goes beyond the socialization. Managers need to find opportunities for employees to work together on projects. All too often, workflows are being broken down, so that individuals have one piece of a bigger picture, and we're working alone. And loneliness in the workplace is a big problem and I don't want to go off on a tangent. But managers have a real opportunity to think creatively and position people on the team to work together, because not only will it create this sense of community, but it's highly likely that you'll get a better product out of this collaboration because of the creativity that comes through teamwork.

Jen: We put a lot of this responsibility on the manager and many managers themselves are struggling and not getting the support that they need and aren't taking care of their own well-being. How can we support our managers?

Rich: Yeah, it starts when they're either hired or promoted. It's very rare for a newly hired or promoted manager to receive training in leading with well-being. They're going to get training on all the different software and procedures, but they're not going to get training on what it means to lead with well-being and how they can practice self-care during the workday as well. That's one of the major reasons why I wrote my book, *Jen, A Cure for the Common Company*. I wanted managers and leaders at all levels to know what they could do for their teams, that they could also do for themselves. It's not an easy answer, like you can't just snap your finger and everything just falls into place. And I do believe that managers are often overworked, just like frontline employees, and companies that can find efficiencies through the technology that's available should take advantage of that to bring their workforce to a reasonable workload, not to increase efficiencies to then put more on top of the managers. If companies continue to push employees and managers to the brink, they will leave. People are voting with their feet.

Jen: Yeah, that's not good for any of us.

Rich: No, it's not good and you have a turnover and it creates more stress for the people who are left behind. We talked previously why should C-suite pay attention to this? Why should they not cut the budget for well-being during potentially an economic downturn. It's because when you do that, you create additional costs for your workplace. It costs money to recruit new talent. I mean it's just this vicious cycle that, you know, our leaders might be contributing to if they decide to cut well-being.

Jen: Absolutely. And one of the other things that I know you talk about is, there was a long-time focus on kind of the cost of, you know, absenteeism. And while that's valid and viable, presenteeism or the other popular term of quiet quitting, that people are kind of 'showing up,' but doing the absolute bare minimum and the cost to an organization's bottom line of that is huge, and it's something that I don't think we're fully looking at or kind of embracing as a real cost.

Rich: Yeah, I just don't know that most leaders appreciate the gravity and the strength of the connection between employee health and well-being and all the various facets of running a successful business. I think they appreciate their own health and well-being, and yet they're not recognizing that many of the people that work in their organization may not have access to all the benefits and privileges that the

leaders have. And therefore they're not respecting the needs of the majority of the people who work at that organization.

Jen: So how do we get them from where we are now to where we know they need to be?

Rich: Jen, I've been in this area for 25 years and one of the most challenging pieces has been and remains getting leaders to sit long enough to take a comprehensive look at the opportunities that are available through leveraging well-being. They will sit long enough to hear like a quick answer. What's the quick fix? But to get them to truly appreciate this is challenging. Now, some executives are getting their own well-being coaching, which I think is creating some pockets of epiphany. And yet it's probably not going to be enough to sway a whole leadership team to move. I know that there are some opportunities for executive teams to do well-being retreats. I also know that there's at least one book out there that if an executive team read together, it would give them the groundwork for them to have a meaningful conversation internally about how to proceed forward. I think if there's a leadership team that has a genuine interest, there are a number of different paths they can take to get started.

Jen: And do you have a name for that book.

Rich: *A Cure for the Common Company*. It's, I think, a necessary read for all leaders, all human resource professionals. And it's my hope that since leaders are in such a big rush during the workday that they are able to read a few pages every day for a couple of weeks, so that they can get the full picture and walk away from the book knowing that there is a blueprint for their organization to be successful.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. So, we've talked a lot about leaders and managers. What about for our listeners that, I mean, I believe that everyone in an organization is a leader of some sort, but if you don't feel like you're kind of in a people leader role or have the ability to make significant impact to these changes, what can an individual do to contribute to creating this culture of well-being?

Rich: I'm glad you asked that. I really like and respect that you shared that everyone's a leader in their own right. And I wholeheartedly agree. It's not uncommon for individuals to make a difference in their organization without the direction of their leaders by title. Especially on a team, I actually think that there's a lot of managers out there who would appreciate if one of your listeners took the initiative to be the well-being champion for the team and being that well-being champion doesn't necessarily mean you're the one who leads that 2:00 PM yoga class. There are a number of different well-being strategies that don't require resources, but really just require some knowledge of the possibilities. So I'll just use the first building block as an example. The P in plan for success, the P is for peer support, and any well-being champion out there could be the person who volunteers to be that peer who can support other people on their team, who are struggling with either creating a healthy habit or having difficulty with whatever emotions that their workplace is bringing to them. Now, it's not like your listeners can just go out there and coax their coworkers into sharing their deepest and darkest fears and challenges. But there is a methodical way to gain the trust of your colleagues and to be seen as an excellent resource in well-being.

Jen: And how would one do that?

Rich: Well, this goes to the idea of getting to know each other. And if you are uncomfortable with sharing how you went from having high blood pressure to normal blood pressure by whatever, by meditating or cutting out potato chips. You don't have to do that. Maybe you'd rather just ask a

coworker to take a walk with you at lunch. I bet there's at least one person on your team who would really appreciate that culture connection point, that nudge to get them up at lunchtime and moving instead of eating in front of their computer. So these are just small steps, Jen, that anyone can offer. There's a whole bunch more, but I don't want to use the rest of our time together.

Jen: I got it. I just wanted a quick example of which I know that they're many. And you brought up kind of a great thought for me that I would be remiss if I didn't ask, because you said eating lunch in front of their computer or their laptop. In your view, I mean, what's been kind of the impact of technology on our ability to build culture and create these six building blocks. I mean you could say that technology is just a tool and it absolutely is. But how do we kind of get out of those ruts of you of eating our lunch at our desk behind our computer and not using it as an opportunity to either care for our own well-being or connect with others.

Rich: Well, if I can just render a quick editorial there's not a week that goes by, that my wife and I feel like we've had a net negative with all of the technology revolution compared to what it was like before having mobile devices and electronics at our fingertips at all times of the day. The fact is we have to live with them, so how will we live with them? And technology can be helpful, but it could also be harmful as you and I probably agree. On the culture building side, you know, we use a platform to bring our employee community together to participate in well-being activities. But it's not just the technology platform that keeps us together, I'm going to give you an example, Jen, because we started with the example of moving at lunch time. We offer a steps challenge twice a year at Johns Hopkins. And many of your listeners might be thinking, yeah, steps challenge done that, been there. Our employees love our steps challenge. We design our steps challenge, so that people sign up on teams of coworkers. That gives them that instance peer support by signing up with others. Yes, we use a platform to help us coordinate who these teams are and to keep track of the steps, but we definitely make an effort to bring people together through these teams and through messaging from our leadership. Our leadership is out there with our employees walking at our kickoff launches and we'll be walking at our wrap up walk. So we can't just rely on technology alone, we have to have that people connection to really bring well-being to its optimal state.

Jen: And so, are you a believer in hybrid work, virtual work? Where do you fall on that kind of continuum? Obviously, there's always a need for in person human connection, but what does that look like in your world.

Rich: Well, I'm glad you asked about my world. So I work for Johns Hopkins Medicine, which is a large health system, so absolutely the majority of our workforce is in person and on on-site. And yet the pandemic caused many of our workers to set up remotely. And we do have a hybrid situation for many of the workers who are not health care providers. I think that teams need to make every effort to be flexible, so that both the employee and the organization win. And I'm pretty confident that people and the organization win when there is at least some in-person interaction. The benefits of social connectedness really came to light during the pandemic. Although, the research has been available for decades, I just think we can't ignore the value of in-person gatherings and in my opinion, to optimize our own individual health, as well as the success of the organization there has to be opportunities to gather.

Jen: I agree 100% and obviously Anh Phillips and I wrote a lot about this in our own book, *Work Better Together*. So you're not going to get any argument from me. I do think that, kind of, rethinking why we

gather and where we gather or what we go into the office for versus not for those of us that have the ability to work remotely is an important consideration for sure.

Rich: Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned your book, *Work Better Together*, because I really liked it. And in my final chapter of my book, I even quote couple of sentences that I really liked. Thank you for bringing that work to our community.

Jen: Absolutely. Thank you. And likewise on your book. So I have one final question for you, Rich, I want to know how you started with, you know, how you became passionate about workplace and workforce well-being. And so, I have to ask, how do you personally embed well-being into your workday? What does that look like for you and your teams?

Rich: Well, I start my workday with a cup of coffee and then I do 10 minutes of meditation and then I'm off to the rest of my day. But every day I get outside and walk or some other form of exercise. I also am a Pesco-vegan with a side of chocolate, and I've been fortunate...

Jen: Dark chocolate or milk chocolate or white chocolate?

Rich: I try dark chocolate, but the problem is...that's really it, I do have a problem and if I see chocolate, I have a reflex. It's called the chocolate reflex. So I try for dark chocolate, but I'm a little bit soft.

Jen: I love that you named it the chocolate reflex. I totally took this off track there. Tell me about the rest of your day.

Rich: That's okay. I make it a point with my team to have meetings in person. We cover a large geographic area in Maryland and the District of Columbia, and we even have a hospital in Florida. So we find that we're in different places on different days of the week, but we do come together several times a month to be sure we have face-to-face interaction.

Jen: Great. Well, Rich, thank you again for being on the show. So much wisdom in talking to you as well as in your book and the rest of the work that you do. So thank you and hopefully we will talk soon.

Rich: Thanks very much, Jen.

Jen: I'm so grateful Dr. Safeer could be with us today to talk about workplace well-being.

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