



The human touch: How CFOs can support a culture of well-being

How are you feeling?

It's a question too few C-suite executives seriously ask one another, their employees, or even themselves. Scrambling from one meeting to the next, they may not find time to take a breather. Emotions can be contagious. And corporate leaders may be unaware of their own moods—or those of others—at any given time.

The disconnect between executives and employees surfaces in Deloitte's second annual [Workplace Well-being Survey](#).¹ More than three-quarters of C-suite leaders surveyed believe the health of their workforce has improved, but many

employees seem to see it differently. Most feel their health has worsened or stayed the same since [last year's survey](#).² Are executives upfront about their own emotional state and feelings? According to 72% of them, they share well-being information with their employees either "always" or "often." Just 16% of workers, however, confirm seeing this level of transparency.³

Large organizations spend an average of roughly \$10.5 million a year on well-being programs.⁴ These can include offerings such as emotional support, financial health, and physical activity. By providing a mixture of well-being programs, policies,

and benefits, some companies may reduce both direct (insurance premiums, workers' compensation claims) and indirect (employee turnover, absenteeism) costs. But such outcomes may only be possible if executives and employees alike can become more aware of each other's wants and needs, aligning around a well-being plan fostering a sense of belonging.

In this edition of *CFO Insights*, we'll explore the influential role CFOs can play in supporting a thriving well-being culture. What does it mean to lead with well-being? Which policies and practices promote utilization? And how can leaders even begin to assess worker well-being?

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New prescription

It's not as if employers have just begun addressing workplace morale and engagement. But organizational well-being efforts have bulked up since the days when cutting-edge practices consisted of stocking healthy snacks in the vending machine and installing foosball tables in the company cafeteria.⁵

In an era of hyperconnectivity, overstimulation, and porous boundaries between work and home, companies may now be subsidizing things like meditation apps and gym memberships. Others may provide massage therapy, mental health counseling, and advanced policies regarding sabbaticals and leaves. Great Place To Work®, which partners with *Fortune* magazine to produce its *Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® List*, identified employee well-being as a significant differentiator between companies that make the rankings and those that don't. Among companies on the list, 83% of employees report a healthy workplace, compared to 52% at typical US companies.⁶ The analysis found that employees who experience elevated levels of well-being in the workplace are three times more likely than those at other companies to intend to stay and to recommend their employer to others.⁷

But for now, well-being programs seem to exert a less-than-optimal impact on enhancing employees' work lives. A mere 16% of US workers are in a high state of well-being, according to a study conducted by Great Place To Work® and Johns Hopkins University's Carey Business School.⁸ A recent Gallup poll found 19% of US workers rate their mental health as fair or poor.⁹

The findings don't appear to be a lagging indicator, either. In gauging the recent impact of well-being programs, Deloitte's 2023 Workplace Well-being Survey found that only around one-third of employees say their well-being improved last year, despite executives' perceptions to the contrary (see Figure 1). One out of four say their mental health worsened, and 37% indicate their financial well-being worsened.¹⁰ The survey, conducted in collaboration with Workplace Intelligence, drew responses from 3,150 employees, managers, and C-level executives across the US, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

There seems to be little mystery about what may be impeding the effectiveness of well-being programs for employees: their work. In the Deloitte Workplace Well-being Survey, 8 in 10 respondents say they are struggling with a heavy workload and stressful job.¹¹

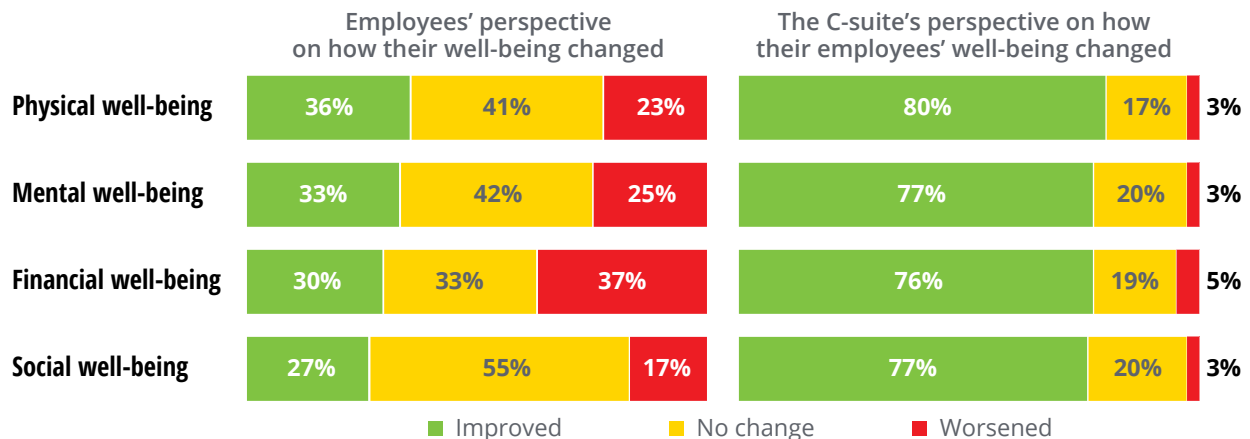
Indeed, executives at companies that have boosted investments in well-being programs may need to rethink their strategy. While such programs might be well-intentioned, the approach may be flawed. In the Deloitte Workplace Well-being Survey, fewer than 6 out of 10 employees say their company embeds well-being "very" or "somewhat" well into their job (57%) or in the workplace culture (56%).¹² Without fully integrating wellness into the organization's DNA—with employees and management serving as co-creators—a siloed program could risk becoming an exercise in frustration.

Missed connections

The absence of a cohesive well-being strategy in some workplaces comes through clearly in the Deloitte survey. In addition to conflicting views on the effectiveness of current well-being programs, other fissures seem to point to the need for a more holistic approach. They include the following:¹³

- **Managers feel responsible but not empowered.** Managers may play a pivotal role in ensuring workforce well-being, but they often lack organizational backing to do so. Among surveyed managers, 70% say obstacles like rigid company policies, a heavy workload, and an unsupportive workplace culture prevent them from better supporting workforce well-being.

Figure 1. Most employees in the Workplace Well-being Survey say their health worsened or stayed the same in the last year, but over three out of four executives believe their workers' health improved.



Source: Deloitte's 2023 Workplace Well-being Survey

- **Executives plan to do more, but not immediately.** Among C-suite respondents, 85% say they'll become more responsible for workforce well-being over the next few years. However, around half of employee respondents say they are "always" or "often" exhausted (52%) or stressed (49%). Moreover, 60% of employee respondents say they are seriously considering taking a job with another company that would better support their well-being. And adding to the urgency: fully 78% of employees surveyed feel their company's leaders should step down if they can't maintain an acceptable level of workforce well-being.
- **Public reporting sounds good but isn't being heard.** Eighty-five percent of executives believe that organizations should be required to publicly report their workforce well-being metrics, yet only about half are doing so. Among surveyed employees, however, just 39% of employees say their company has made such pronouncements.
- **C-suiters embrace human sustainability, but many employees haven't encountered it.** Among C-suiters surveyed, 89% say their company is advancing human sustainability—the notion of well-being as a longer-term and broader priority encompassing climate and society—but just 41% of employees agree. (See accompanying story, "Can well-being help sustain human sustainability?")

Triple-peak days

Well-being, often the domain of HR in the past, has become an essential skill for all leaders, including CFOs. Consider this eye-opener: A recent survey found that managers affect employees' mental health as much as their spouses/partners do, and even more than either their doctors or therapists.¹⁴

Given that every workforce is unique—for some employees, financial well-being may be the most pressing issue—CFOs may need to apply greater focus to maximize the company's investment in well-being. Typically, this could require stepping back to reassess what's working and what isn't. Employees will likely have much to say on the subject, including what program elements would be helpful and what barriers prevent them from accessing existing resources. A survey may help pinpoint employees' sentiments.

What follows are some questions CFOs can ask to begin formulating a plan:

1. **How are employees doing their work?** Issues such as extra-weighty workloads and the triple-peak day¹⁵ (when employees, freed from interruptions, catch up on work at night) can often be unearthed by analyzing the company's aggregated internal data.¹⁶ Such problems can be addressed by introducing more flexibility in work schedules rather than making around-the-clock availability the assumed standard.
2. **What on earth can we do about meetings?** It seems to be a nearly universal workplace howl: Everybody has too many meetings. By assessing the value of calls and confabs, CFOs may be able to reduce the number of employees who need to attend. In some cases, they can even consider putting some meetings out of existence. The same approach could apply to reports.
3. **How many vacation days aren't employees taking?** The company should signal that taking vacation time—truly away from the business—is essential. "Offboarding" practices—delegating an employee's work in advance of vacation and *not* copying the absent employee on emails during time away, to name two—can help make it easier for employees. And, as CFOs know, unused vacation time can be a financial liability.
4. **What can we do to promote a sense of belonging?** At its core, well-being tends to be a cultural issue for corporations. If the concept fails to gain traction, it may indicate silos or fractures within the organization. To try to lower the barriers, senior executives may want to assign "buddies" during the onboarding process. Similarly, they may establish employee resource groups that dovetail with employee interests and cultivate community.



In the end, of course, one way for leaders to find out what's dampening workers' well-being is to listen to them. Ask: what's preventing you from taking a vacation? What do you think of your workload? Well-being tends to be shaped not only by organizational dynamics but also by human encounters.

As awkward as such conversations may be, any attempt will likely be appreciated. In the Deloitte survey, only 39% of employees agree with the statement, "My leaders make well-being a priority, and they lead with empathy."

To help turn this around, CFOs and other executives will likely want to keep well-being high on the agenda, whether at one-on-one sessions or standing meetings. But before entering those meetings—no matter what kind of day you've had—it may be wise to set aside five minutes to take stock of your emotional state. The technique generally requires asking yourself a single silent query:

How are you feeling?

Can well-being help sustain human sustainability?

Well-being isn't just about making sure everybody feels better physically, mentally, or emotionally. In its most expansive form, it underpins human sustainability. A relatively new concept, human sustainability involves the long-term, collective well-being of individuals, organizations, climate, and society.

On a company level, it consists of making investment decisions with a legacy-tinged lens to ensure the organization positively impacts those who come in contact with it.

In Deloitte's 2023 [Workplace Well-being Survey](#), the foundational statement that "my company has a responsibility to advance human sustainability" was met agreeably by 74% of C-suite respondents. Only 54% of employees shared that sentiment.¹⁷

The survey also uncovered enthusiasm gaps between employees and C-suite members around steps companies could take to advance human sustainability. Nearly three out of four surveyed employees say they expect their companies to adopt new standards and practices that support their health. These included initiatives like setting minimum salaries, ensuring equitable pay, piloting a four-day work week (74%), and supporting the well-being of suppliers and the local communities where they operate (62%). However, less than half of surveyed C-suite members say their companies are taking these steps.

Nevertheless, a global Deloitte survey conducted last year found that 79% of business leaders agreed that an organization is responsible for creating value for workers as human beings and society in general.¹⁸ In the Deloitte 2023 [Workplace Well-being Survey](#), 73% of CXOs say they are amenable to the statement, "I would accept a pay cut to work for a company that is advancing human sustainability." And employees? A little more than one in four felt the same way.

End notes

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