



# **9 Key Wellness Strategies** to Elevate Your Organization

## *Connection. Community. Friendship. Insight. Thought Leadership. Inspiration.*

These are just a few of the reasons I attend the Wellness Council of America's National Training Summit each year. I always leave feeling energized and inspired to take on the next phase of my career journey. I've made lifelong friends and mentors who have positively shaped my personal life and my career.

If I could capture the essence of this year's conference in three words, it would be these:

### **Other. People. Matter.**

For years, much of the dialogue in the wellness field has centered on nutrition and exercise. Those topics matter, but what is often missing is a focus on the whole person and on mental, emotional and relational health.

The theme of the conference was "the human behind the numbers", which is something that really resonates with me as someone who takes a people-first approach to the work I do. Ryan Picarella, the President of WELCOA, opened the conference officially announcing their new definition of wellness, one that is more all encompassing and advocates

for fulfilling employee needs in these areas: health, meaning, safety, connection, achievement, growth and resiliency. Throughout the conference, each speaker focused on one of those aspects of wellness in their presentation and offered us new ways of thinking about what it means to be well.

Below are my top 9 takeaways from the summit. As you read through them, I invite you to reflect on your organization's culture and the people who make it possible to do what you do each day. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do our people feel valued, seen, heard, supported, and appreciated?
2. Do they feel like they matter?
3. What could I do to be a change agent to make it possible for people to show up as their whole selves at work?
4. Are we sending people home healthier and happier at the end of the day? (Thanks, Rex Miller, for contributing this one!)

## **Top 9 Themes from WELCOA's 2018 Summit**

### **1. Break the Stigma on Mental Health**

This was the prevailing theme of the conference and was made clear by Mettie Spiess' powerful opening keynote at the conference. She is on a mission to create a world without suicide and to move from silence to stigma around the topic of mental health. After sharing her deeply moving story of losing both of her brothers to suicide, Mettie encouraged us to equalize our focus on mental and physical health initiatives in the workplace, following a 1:1 ratio. Think about the last time you did a fitness challenge or nutrition workshop, policy or training. How about training, workshop or policy related to mental health, anxiety, stress, or suicide prevention? Some of us might fear that the latter topics are too personal and off limits.

Mettie offered a different perspective. In a 160,000 person survey conducted by Healics in 2017, the #2 top request from employees was mental health

support. Employees want it, but we're not offering it nearly enough. This is especially true among middle aged men, as 70% of the suicide deaths in 2016 were middle-aged men. The loneliness epidemic is running rampant in our culture, and people are starving for connection.

Provide and promote access to support in a variety of ways, including hotlines, text, groups, chat, phone and video. Mettie shared that men and women have different preferences when it comes to receiving information about mental health. Men prefer text or video and women prefer phone or group support. She left us with hope and empowered us to recognize that anyone has the power to make a change or save a life. We have to be willing to jump in and be intentional about noticing people. Be willing to take a risk and have a conversation with someone whose behavior has changed. Ask them how they are doing. Make them feel seen. Offer to help. Each of us has the ability to notice people and step in. To receive Mettie's free stigma-free workplace blueprint and learn more about her stigma-crushing work, go to her website.

## 2. Take Care of and Love Yourself

As health promotion professionals, much of our time and energy are spent serving other people. While that is a noble goal, it often leaves us neglecting our own wellbeing and at an increased risk of burning out. As I've shared on my personal blog, I dealt with my own episode of burnout last year and shared my experience in a brief Ignite session at another conference earlier this year:

Because of my experience with burnout, I was thrilled to see that burnout and resilience expert, Dr. Jeff Jernigan, was going to be focusing on that topic in his session. He opened with some data from Virgin Pulse, capturing input from 25,000 employees: 85% reported dealing with stress, 76% reported being tired at work, 43% suffered a lack of sleep, 55% were experiencing serious burnout, and 86% reported obstacles to accessing the help they needed. Here's what all of the data said to me:

**We cannot give our best to others if we are operating from such a state of depletion ourselves.**

In her session, Kim Harrison made an insightful comment about the importance of love and self-care: *"Our capacity to be generous and generative is directly correlated with our ability to receive love."* If we cannot receive love from ourselves, we will be limited in what we can offer to others. We must start with taking care of ourselves first.

If we don't take care of ourselves, we will likely experience breakdown in at least one of three areas: body, mind and spirit. Dr. Jernigan introduced a new concept that I had not heard of before: "moral injury". It occurs at the level of our spirit and is *"an injury that destroys our image of self and worldview resulting in complete psychological or physiological collapse from which recovery may be difficult or time-consuming."* I can attest to the fact that that is exactly what happens when you burn out. Every area of your life is impacted.

His explanation of burnout was the most thought-provoking I've heard:

**"Burnout is the result of 100s of 1000s of small betrayals of purpose."**

When we burn out, we have betrayed our bodies, our health, our sleep, our relationships, our needs, and a host of other elements of purpose and wellbeing. This is why a core component of resilience is self-care and four contributors to self-care are exercise, nutrition, sleep and relationships. I've written about the importance of each of those behaviors on my blog in this post about how I recovered from burnout.

Dr. Jernigan offered some new ideas that I plan to incorporate in the future. He suggested processing thoughts and feelings through journaling by reading aloud what you've written, so you can hear yourself differently and notice patterns. This process connects the left and right sides of the brain to allow for richer understanding and insight. Other ways to connect the left and right sides of the brain are listening to the sound of running water (I use a free app called White Noise) and listening to music. When we are in a state of depletion and fear, as is often the case with burnout, we do not have access to our best thinking, so anything we can do to connect our brain can help us reduce the risk of burnout. Dr. Jernigan also drove home the importance of relationships, highlighting that they are clinically proven to be a cure for burnout. That leads us to the next theme.

## 3. Build High-Quality Connections with People

Chris White, Managing Director at The University of Michigan's Center for Positive Organizations, emphasized the importance of building high-quality connections with people. We were challenged to reflect on five interactions in the workplace over the past week and to write down the names of five people with whom we interacted. After thinking about the interaction, we were to jot down how our energy was impacted (positive, negative or neutral) and how we think the other person's energy was affected by the interaction. Positive energizers elevate us, and sometimes we do that for others.

Chris shared from the research that people at the top of the relational energy map trump those with more information in the workplace. I liked the challenge questions he posed and wanted to share them with you to consider for yourself and share with your team:

1. How might you spend more time with positive energizers and less time with those you find de-energizing?

2. How might you transform the de-energizing relationships?
3. How might you become even more positively energizing to others?

We are accountable for how we show up and for the impact we have.

And we are hardwired to be relational - to connect and belong; those are the most powerful drivers of our behavior. Nearly every speaker mentioned something about loneliness, connection, community, or relationships and how important it is to spend time with others.

In her session about the power of intentionally connecting through community, Dee Eastman, Founding Director of The Daniel Plan, opened with her personal story of having five children under the age of five. Three of them were triplets and two of the triplets were born with Cerebral Palsy. She and her husband had no choice but to lean into community in order to make it through the first three years, in particular. Dee shared compelling stories about how people around the world have used The Daniel Plan to restore health and happiness, to heal sick and overly medicated bodies, and to provide support and accountability rooted in grace rather than judgment.

The Daniel Plan's holistic approach takes into account 5 Fs: food, fitness, faith, focus and friends. The friendship factor and small group nature of The Daniel Plan program is what drives its success and sustainability. Each person who takes part feels like he or she is part of a community, not alone on an island. Dee also referenced Dan Buettner's work on the Blue Zones and reiterated how three of the nine factors for longevity are rooted in community - right tribe, family first, and belonging. Quality relationships boost our immune system, improve mood, reduce the risk of depression, drive engagement and creativity, and help us perform better.

What are you doing to build high quality relationships at your company and to incorporate initiatives that bring people together and foster community?

## 4. Work Is a Relationship

Jason Lauritsen added a key voice to the conversation, focusing on the elements of a healthy relationship and applying them to work. I love what he had to say about work:

### Work is a **relationship**, not a **contract**.

Let that sit with you for a moment. Think about your work as a relationship.

- Is it relational or transactional?
- How does that impact how you and your employees show up and perform?
- When it's working, what does that feel like? What does it look like?

If it's a healthy relationship, Jason explained that it can be characterized by these five elements: (1) **Appreciation** (*I feel valued*), (2) **Acceptance** (*I can be myself*), (3) **Communication** (*I'm informed and feel heard*), (4) **Support** (*I feel like you've got my back*), and (5) **Commitment** (*We are mutually committed to each other's wellbeing and happiness and repairing the relationship when something goes wrong*).

Yes, all of this takes time, but giving people our time shows them we care about them. Care, connection and time together lead to trust and engagement. Time is the currency of relationships.

I loved Jason's final challenge. Think about a policy or a program at your organization. Ask yourself this simple but insightful question about its impact:

### **"Does it harm or build the relationship with our employees?"**

In other words, how would that program or policy work if you were using it with someone you love and care about? He tied the question to the dreaded annual performance appraisal. Imagine a friend of yours. Now, think about approaching your friend with an "annual friendship appraisal". How would your friend feel getting feedback once a year about how good of a friend they were or receiving critical feedback from something that happened nine months prior? Chances are, your employees feel the same way about an annual performance appraisal. Consider reviewing your handbook policies and ask yourself what kind of message you're communicating. Do the language and policies make your employees feel supported and guided or bound by a rigorous contract that will reduce the risk of lawsuits?

Jason got me thinking. Consider this.

If we treat employees like children who can't be trusted, we should not be surprised when they behave

like children and break our trust.

Treat your employees like adults who are worthy of trust and respect. You may be surprised by how they respond. Other people's expectations of us affect our behavior.

## 5. Seek Feedback and Listen Intently

As Jason mentioned, a core component of a healthy relationship is clear communication, something that is a challenge for nearly every organization. He reminded us that "uncertainty kills engagement," so communicating clearly is essential if we want our workplaces and the people in them to thrive.

Andrew Sykes, a friend and colleague who was one of the early influencers in my career starting in 2010, is one of the most effective communicators I know. His work focuses on changing habits at work. His session rested on the question, **"If my company were a person, what kind of person would they be?"**

He suggested there are three types of companies - Jerks (you realize they're not a fit and get out quickly enough to limit the damage); Prince Charming (you feel listened to, invested in and valued); and Trojan Horse (they promise you one thing but change on you and break your heart and spirit).

Andrew invited us to explore 11 habits of Prince Charming companies, many of which related to communication, listening, and asking questions. He challenged us to follow deliberate practice rather than repetitive practice, which is about stopping and taking the time to seek feedback. It's what his company calls "Awesomesauce Feedback." Here's what it looks like. On a daily basis think about a project or situation and...

1. Share with a colleague (1) One thing you think you did well and (2) One thing you think you could do better.
2. Then, ask your colleague, "What's one thing you think I did well?" and "What's one thing you think I could do better?"

If we stay open to this kind of feedback and seek it every single day, we can grow exponentially over the course of a year. All of us need coaching and guidance for how to get better each time we do something, but we rarely seek it out. Start doing this. Start asking

these questions and seeking this kind of feedback.

As you do, incorporate Andrew's second trait of great companies - empathic listening. He asked us to think of someone who is a fantastic listener. What behaviors do they demonstrate? They probably do the kind of listening we do when we're on a first date. What if we listened that intently to people at work? How would that change our relationships?

## 6. Be Passionately Curious

Another key component of effective communication is asking good questions. Too often, we make assumptions about why things are the way they are or why people behave as they do. We'd be much better served to ask questions instead.

In her session about using workplace design to foster healthy workplaces, Leigh Stringergave us an opportunity to chat with our peers about an important two-part question:

**"How does your workspace or work policies INHIBIT or ENABLE health, wellbeing, or engagement in your organization today?"**

I challenge you to take that question back to a cross-sectional team of people (or all of your employees, if possible!) at your workplace and see how they respond. People support what they help create, and if they are part of the discovery process, they will likely want to be part of the solution.

Leigh also shared how insight and creativity come to us when we are in a state of relaxation and that sitting at a desk tends to be our least creative time. Ask yourself, "When and where do my best ideas come to me?" On a walk? In the shower? In a place of worship or in nature? It's important that we ask probing questions about our companies but also about ourselves and that we redesign the workplace and work experience to support wellbeing and creativity.

The importance of questions continued in a breakout session about the roll-out of WELCOA's new seven benchmarks. My friends and colleagues, Jennifer Pitts and Jen Arnold, invited us to think bigger and be more holistic in our approach to culture and wellness. If we want to be effective, we have to move beyond siloed

programs and begin to do the hard work of shifting our cultures. This kind of change often starts with asking a few questions they shared in their session:

1. How does our wellness approach fit into the bigger picture of the organization?
2. How can I help the company reflect employee wellness in our vision, values and strategy?
3. How can we create collaborative networks united by common values and intentions?
4. What are possible new indicators of success? New ways of monitoring progress? (besides HRAs, biometric screenings and other clinical metrics)

If we want to see change happen, we have to ask thoughtful questions. If you don't know where to begin, start by being passionately curious.

## 7. Challenge What's Always Been Done

Andrew Sykes and Rex Miller, in particular, challenged us to question what's always been done. If we want to spark change, we would be wise to push back on our traditional approaches to problem-solving and whether or not they are working. Andrew referenced a company he has worked with, the Cooper Companies, that was willing to take a risk and stop doing things that weren't working. For instance, many companies offer biometric screenings for years yet have no scientific evidence that screenings have made an impact. Why do we keep doing things that are not working? Andrew offered a new approach and a few simple questions to redirect our focus:

1. What if we stop doing that? (i.e., a behavior that does not appear to be working). What if we stop focusing on what's wrong?
2. What if we focus on what's right? What if we help people focus on what's good in life?

Rex Miller chimed in with insight from the research he did while writing his most recent book, *The Healthy Workplace Nudge*. He reminded us that human nature is at the root of our challenges and that humans are predictably irrational. In other words, people tend to make systematic mistakes and don't always make choices that consistently maximize our own happiness or success. Furthermore, we do not correctly update our opinions and beliefs based upon new information

that is received. We don't always make decisions based on what we know, yet most wellness programs are built on this traditional economic theory. To learn more about behavioral economics and how to leverage nudges to change behavior, read Rex's book and check out the work of the Center for Advanced Hindsight.

Rex also talked about the importance of questioning the way we do work. He cited research from Jeffrey Pfeffer's book, *Dying for a Paycheck*, showing that work is the fifth leading cause of death because of the stress it generates. He introduced us to the concept of job design and the importance of balancing cognitive load with autonomy to mitigate stress. If we have high cognitive load and high autonomy, we are likely to thrive much more than someone with a high load but low autonomy. We need to feel like we can impact when, where and how we work. Autonomy is key to engagement, so we need to design systems at work that allow for more autonomy, flexibility and freedom.

Another change agent who is on a mission to challenge the traditional way of doing things at work is Tet Salva. She is the CEO of MomWarrior and is driven to better support moms in the workplace. Tet shared from the research that mothers are 79% less likely to be hired and 50% less likely to be promoted; make 20% less in salary for the same position as others, and are held to higher performance standards than their peers. What are we doing to redesign the workplace to better support working parents?

These are important questions we need to be asking and issues we need to address if we want to see real change happen at work.

## 8. Connect with Purpose

Mental health, self-care, connection and relationships all come back to one common theme - purpose. Arthur Woods, Co-founder of Imperative, drove home the conversation around purpose.

He said something at the start of his presentation that deeply resonated with me:

**"Purpose should not be a luxury."**

We often think of purpose as something we can consider once we've addressed our basic survival needs at the bottom of the pyramid. We assume that purpose is a luxury available to a few instead of something for the masses. Historically, we've used two

levers to trigger behavior change at work - pay and promotion. We think these two things are what will move people...but they're not. People want to have a voice, to make a meaningful contribution and to grow. They want to connect to purpose.

Arthur challenged us to think differently, to recognize that we don't have to wait until retirement to find meaning in our lives. He added his insight (in yellow) to an oft-cited Mark Twain quote about purpose:

**The most important day in your life is not the day you are born or the day you find out why. It's the day you do something about it.**

In his session, Arthur explored three stages of unlocking purpose - discover, activate and lead. Discovery is a constant search and continuous process, and it's possible for anyone. The highest performers find purpose in the here and now, not outside of work or once they've reached the top. Our purpose is driven by our strengths, values, and our personal preference for scale of impact. Through this first phase, we explore questions like:

1. When you're at your best, what's your natural approach? What strengths do you offer?
2. Who do you impact? (*2/3s of the workforce do not believe their work makes a difference - we need to change this!*)
3. What do you stand for / what are your values?

Activation is about bringing purpose to life and taking personal responsibility for our job and career. In this phase, we can ask ourselves, "*What is a **single action** I could take to better align my purpose with my work?*"

In the leadership phase of purpose, we inspire others to bring their full selves to work. It's a departure from a fear-based way of managing people. The purpose-driven leader of the future will focus on and honor their impact on the human spirit; they will move from fear to empowerment.

Purpose is essential to our wellbeing. What are you doing to incorporate purpose into your culture and wellness strategy?

## 9. Do Good to Feel Good

When we are serving others, we tend to feel a deep sense of purpose. Cory Smith, Co-Founder and CEO of Wisdom Labs, offered this insight in his session, "Business is the biggest vehicle for positive social change."

Heath Shackleford facilitated a conversation around the topic of doing well by doing good, highlighting the impact socially responsible brands and connection between purpose and profits. I recently wrote a pulse post highlighting the business case for giving back and volunteerism at work that may interest you if you want to learn more about that topic.

In their recent millennial engagement survey, Deloitte found that "young workers are eager for business leaders to be proactive about making a positive impact in society—and to be responsive to employees' needs." Jennifer Benz and Cory Smith mentioned Deloitte's research and its tie-in to overall wellness. Employees want to feel like they are making a difference, having an impact and contributing to the greater good.

## Tying It All Together

The primary theme of this year's summit was to remember the human behind the numbers.

Other people matter. Break the stigma on mental health. Notice people and jump in to help. Focus on self-care, self-compassion and resilience. Lead with love. Build high quality connections and put relationships first. Seek feedback, listen empathically and ask powerful questions. Be passionately curious. Challenge the way things have always been done. Connect with purpose. Do well by doing good.

**You** have the power to make a difference, an opportunity to have a significant impact.

**You matter** and your voice, talents, and perspective are needed to continue to advance human health, happiness and performance at work.

## Next Steps

To receive more insights and thought leadership like this, sign up to be a WELCOA member here and complete their newly redesigned Well Workplace Checklist.

To continue the conversation about rehumanizing the workplace, join me and others (some of whom are also part of the WELCOA Nation) at the inaugural Fusion 2.0 Conference in Minneapolis in November!

I'll be leading a breakout session about how to beat burnout and shift from "fried" to flourishing. I hope to see you there. To learn more and to register, visit the conference website.

If you'd like to learn more about bringing a Beating Burnout session to your workplace or conference, I would love to chat with you. To read the other pulse posts I've written about wellbeing and culture, click here.

## Reading List

I'm a voracious reader and believe books are some of our greatest teachers and perspective givers. For that reason, I've put together a reading list based on what the different speakers mentioned during their presentations and included some of their books as well. I've read many of these and can attest to their contribution to my own health and wellbeing and my work in organizational culture:

- *The Healthy Workplace Nudge* by Rex Miller, Phillip Williams and Michael O'Neill
- *Change Your Space, Change Your Culture* by Rex Miller, Mabel Casey and Mark Konchar
- *The Healthy Workplace* by Leigh Stringer
- *The Purpose Economy* by Aaron Hurst
- *Forks Over Knives* edited by Gene Stone
- *The Daniel Plan: 40 Days to a Healthier Life* by Rick Warren, Daniel Amen, and Mark Hyman
- *Dying for a Paycheck* by Jeffrey Pfeffer
- *Unlocking High Performance* by Jason Lauritsen (to be released in October 2018)
- *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* by Adam Grant
- *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success* by Adam Grant
- *Reinventing Organizations* by Frederic Laloux
- *The Power of Full Engagement* by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz
- *Why People Die by Suicide* by Thomas Joiner
- *Your Brain on Nature* by Eva Selhub and Alan Logan
- *The Nature Fix* by Florence Williams
- *How Full Is Your Bucket?* by Tom Rath and Donald Clifton
- *The Blue Zones* by Dan Buettner



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