



Trust: The Corporate Wellness Initiative of the Future



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change, and [Katharina Balazs](#) , Associate Professor at ESCP Europe

What if wellness was built directly into corporate DNA instead of being sold to us?

The global wellness industry is doing superbly, thank you very much. In recent years, it grew a healthy 12.8 percent, becoming a [US\\$4.2 trillion](#) market. Whether or not the life of wellness consumers is improving in tandem remains another matter altogether.

Wellness products and services run the gamut, from vitamins and juice cleanses to upscale wellness studios and spas. At the very end of the spectrum, there are tours positioned as healing and spiritual journeys to the Amazon, where people go in search of psychedelic, hallucinatory insights through sampling [ayahuasca](#), a traditional plant medicine, under the

guidance of indigenous or self-styled shamans.

Part of this trend, the business of workplace wellness is also thriving. Large corporations such as Goldman Sachs, Microsoft, Intuit or SAP now all have dedicated wellness programmes. Earlier this year, Apple **launched** medical clinics to serve the needs of its staff. As one tech publication sarcastically **noted**, these clinics' website shows happy people standing around a fire on the **beach**, not "a bunch of fat middle-aged nerds hunched over their desks eating soggy sandwiches."

Wellness as a commodity

The wellness industry insists that its offerings are making people feel much happier and healthier, that it is the route to a better life. But given all the hype - and especially given the fact that companies now invest nearly \$US50 billion a year to create wellness experiences for their employees - we should step back and ask ourselves: Do these wellness cures make a tangible difference or are they a passing fad?

Are we really doing ourselves a favour pursuing mindfulness training in the evening while continuing to endure constant daily stress at work? When we spend money on "detoxifying" treatments, crystal readings and expensive retreats, is it possible that we are being taken for a gigantic ride?

It makes sense to strive for wellbeing and a "healthier" lifestyle, be it at home or at work. However, true wellness should be seen as a state of mind. We should not feel compelled to pursue it in the form of external and oftentimes unfounded magical cures.

Living a positive and healthy lifestyle should be a given, rather than something packaged and forced-fed to us as a product we need to purchase, experience and consume. And that also concerns the workplace. When hard-driving corporations with Darwinian cultures institute wellness programmes, is their real goal to change employees' lives or do they most often serve as a way to prevent overworked individuals from completely burning out? In companies where people experience real wellness, it has always been part of the corporate DNA and not just a fad.

The true enablers of wellness in the workplace

The acid test of a great place to work is when employees can enthusiastically recommend it to their friends and family members. That's a clear sign that

the organisation has its employees' wellness at heart. Unfortunately, based on our own experience, very few companies pass this wellness test.

Organisations that truly enable wellness have flat, organic structures that make it easy to share information, ideas and feelings between people at the same level. Communication also flows freely between managers and subordinates, such that the latter feel heard and empowered. Moreover, such places of work provide a true learning environment – knowledge management is not an empty slogan. Flexible work arrangements are a reality, giving people greater control of their personal and professional lives.

For wellness to flourish in an organisation, the first step is to create a climate of trust. Trust implies that people treat each other with mutual respect, behave with integrity and that fair process is a given. Unfortunately, too many organisations are permeated by fear and paranoia. When this happens, creativity disappears by the wayside – and so does wellness.

When a coaching orientation has become part of the organisation's DNA, wellness follows. Over and over again, we have found in our work that team coaching is very effective in breaking down silos and that it serves as a buffer against scapegoating. In addition, a coaching culture encourages people to share knowledge as it makes them feel more connected. After all, if your colleagues are strangers, why would you bother to share what you know with them? All kinds of teams stand to benefit, especially matrix and virtual ones. Last but not least, having a coaching culture helps to get things done.

This doesn't necessarily mean that we should throw wellness programmes out the window. However, as a standalone agenda, wellness devoid of the other essential ingredients, such as trust and a coaching culture, will just turn into yet another management fad. The world is already full of imagined quick-fix "solutions". Executives better realise that if the basics are not in place, their expensive wellness programmes will just be a waste of money.

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Professor Kets de Vries's most recent books are: [Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life](#); [You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges](#); [Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organisation Lives Happily Ever After](#); and [Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide](#).

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