

FALL HEALTH FOR LEADING

by

Rochelle Morandini

Director, Member Health and Well-Being
BCPVPA



August finds Administrators busy finalizing student schedules, working out teacher assignments, and preparing schools. But do your plans include strategies to create an environment that promotes and supports the well-being of your team?

The end of June saw teaching, support and administrative staff heading off on a well-deserved, much-needed summer break – tired and frazzled, yet relieved. But was the summer enough to refresh their bodies, minds, and spirits? For some, the answer is yes. They will return happy, motivated, and energized. Others will be okay, and ready to go. And yet others, perhaps, will return like some students you may know, dragging themselves back but wanting – needing – more of a break.

What can you as a leader do to create a plan that will allow you and your team to start the year with ideas and actions dedicated to well-being?

The Leader's Role in Employee Well-Being

Earlier in my career, I was involved with studies that looked at the interplay between manager and employee relationships and engagement, as well as the influence on employee absence. We found that there was clearly a negative correlation between the quality of the relationship the manager had with an individual employee, and the number of days that employee was absent due to disability. *The better the relationship, the fewer days lost.* Engagement

studies have also proven, time and time again, that the lower the engagement of a staff member at work, the greater their time off for disability. An employee with low engagement takes at least twice as many days off during the year than an employee who is highly engaged.

This leader-to-health influence was also revealed through a similar pattern in our own BCPVPA membership when we examined findings in our recent Thriving in Education survey. Members with better relationships and support from their direct leaders indicated that this was important to their overall well-being, and vice versa.

Your relationship with each individual you lead, and the working culture you create, can have a powerful and positive impact on the well-being of your staff. This is especially important during uncertain times, and when staff are challenged. Good relationships are about sincere caring and understanding. Building those relationships requires genuine effort, time, and empathy.

The good news is that your role as a leader in supporting your team members, including their well-being, uses many of the same tips and tools that make you an effective manager.

Building Healthy Relationships and a Culture of Well-being

Be vulnerable. One silver lining of the pandemic is that it is normalizing mental health challenges. Almost everyone has experienced some level of discomfort. But the universality of the experience will translate into a decrease in stigma only if people – especially people in power – share their experiences. Being honest about your mental health struggles as a leader opens the door for employees to feel comfortable talking with you about their own mental health challenges.

Model healthy behaviors. Don't just say you support well-being. Model it so that your team feels they can prioritize self-care and set boundaries. Administrators who are focused on the well-being of their students and teams often forget to take care of themselves. Share that you're taking a walk in the middle of the

day, having a counselling appointment, or prioritizing your personal time on weekends (and actually turning off email) so that you don't burn out.

Build a culture of connection through check-ins.

Intentionally checking in with each of your direct reports – one-on-one, on a regular basis – will be even more critical this fall. Everyone will be arriving differently in September, and how they each navigate the first few months of the new school year will vary. How staff members manage this re-entry will define how well they cope and perform into the fall. Take time, early in the year, to touch base with each one.

Go beyond a simple “*How are you?*” and ask specific questions about what supports would be helpful. Wait for the full answer. Really listen, and encourage questions and concerns. Make space to hear how your team members are truly doing, and to be compassionate. They may not want to share much detail, which is completely fine: knowing that they can is what matters.

Generate a culture of team connection and compassion at team meetings by asking each person to offer a quick check-in as to how they are arriving that day. Depending on your current team structure and relationships, this process may be a little strained at first. But when you take the lead and share your own status, others are more likely to be comfortable over time.

Offer flexibility and be inclusive. Expect that the situation, your team's needs, and your own needs will continue to change. Check in regularly — particularly at transition points. You can help problem-solve any issues that come up, but only if you know what's happening. Inclusive flexibility is about proactive communication and norm-setting that helps people design and preserve the boundaries they need.

Don't make assumptions about what your staff need; they will most likely need different things at different times. Take a customized approach to addressing stressors, such as challenges with childcare or feeling the need to work all the time. Proactively offer flexibility. Be as generous and realistic as possible.

Ask team members to be patient with one another as

the team continues to flow and adapt with changing circumstances in the district and your school. Trust them, and assume the best. They are relying on you, and will remember how you treated them.

Communicate more than you think you need to.

Remove stress where possible by setting expectations about workloads, prioritizing what must get done, and acknowledging what can be put aside if necessary.

Feel free to share the weekly ReFresh tips — or any other well-being resources that the BCPVPA provides — with your staff, and be aware that shame and stigma prevent many staff members and peers from using their mental health benefits to seek treatment, so normalize the use of those services.

Create trust. The most important part of a leader-staff relationship is trust. Always be honest with your employees and never twist your words. Always tell the truth, and be transparent with your staff. Never gossip about your employees or share any of their personal information to others. Trust is the building block and makes your relationship with employees sustainable. Efforts dedicated to trust-building will give you great results.

Respect your employees. Respect your employees and their opinions. Never make your employees feel neglected. Don't be harsh when you disagree with them. Honour their input, and make an effort to explain your point of view with empathy.

Have a learning attitude. Maintaining a learning attitude helps staff to feel more comfortable when they offer their point of view. This helps employees to realize that they are all the same, and instills a sense of oneness.

The relationship is about trust, and believing in their work. It's a collaboration where genuine involvement from both parties is important.

For the growth of any organization, it's important to understand the subtleties of your relationships. The bottom line for this relationship is to learn, grow, understand, and implement.



Tips to Promote Well-being on your Team

Stay active. Provide staff with opportunities to stay active throughout the day. Transform weekly sit-downs into one-on-one walking meetings. Help staff find materials to make their own standing desks. Let staff know that they are allowed – and encouraged – to get up every hour to stretch and move.

Show gratitude. Being thankful and expressing gratitude is one of the easiest things that managers can do to boost employee well-being. By simply thanking employees for a job well done, work positivity and morale will thrive. Employees who feel valued are happier with their jobs. Make it a habit of finding things to be grateful for – even if it's not the best day at work.

Offer sessions. Education plays a critical role in wellness. Employees can always benefit from new learnings or reminders about healthy eating, getting active and taking care of their mental health. Consider introducing speakers on different well-being topics to staff meetings or pro D days. Reach out to the BCPVPA for ideas if you feel this will help!

Make wellness convenient. Often staff are hesitant to get involved in wellness initiatives because

they are busy. Administration can help combat this by giving employees the opportunity to get healthy at work. Offer employees the ability to get in some exercise throughout the workday. Check with your district to see what is possible.

Offer healthy choices. Rethink sugary, fatty snacks that are brought to meetings or the staff room. Put an end to the 'cake culture' that might be tempting employees to consume more calories. Create a community fruit basket for everyone to share, where employees can pitch in or grab a healthy snack.

Keep wellness stress-free. Wellness should never be complicated or stressful. In fact, for best results, wellness initiatives should be simple and fun. Employees will be more inclined to get involved when initiatives are short, targeted, and easy. Providing wellness ideas for your staff should not stress YOU out!

Participate. Lastly – and most importantly – leaders must also participate. Leaders need to be visible in leading their school's efforts in well-being. Staff need to know that you value well-being and want to give them space and opportunities to incorporate health into their daily routine. Participate in any group wellness activities or challenges such as walking clubs, group meditation, or hourly stretching.

The Leader's Role When A Staff Member is Struggling

Ignoring a staff member who is struggling at work is a risk. Period. In the context of this article, ignoring or downplaying the issue could be interpreted as management negligence.

As a managing leader, you are expected to manage the following working requirements:

1. Staff attendance and tardiness
2. Quality and quantity of work
3. Behaviour and relationships with others
4. Safety

When a staff member's health condition impacts any of these performance points, a responsible and

caring leader will support their staff by hosting a safe conversation and bridging the staff member to available resources. In fact, employers have a Duty to Inquire when a health issue may be impacting performance.

If the employer reasonably should have known that a disability might be the cause of an employee's poor performance, absenteeism, or other issues in the workplace, they have a duty to inquire about the potential existence of a disability.

[Learn more](#)

Some Administrators are more comfortable with these discussions than others. Being confident in facilitating a conversation in situations such as these includes having a clear plan and an understanding of your role and boundaries.

Each staff situation is unique. That said, there are four steps that you as a leader can take to approach the specifics for that individual:

1. Awareness

What have you seen or noticed?

Document any observations and facts that would suggest the staff member is struggling. Align the impact of the observation to one of the four working requirements above.

Make notes of what was happening, the date and time, and the impact of the situation on students, co-workers, parents, school operations, etc.

2. Listening

What is your staff member experiencing?

Set up a time and location to meet with your staff member where you will not be interrupted.

Prepare for the meeting by having a pad of paper and pencil ready for your staff member to take notes, and have tissues available.

Have your documentation organized for reference as required. Be clear with yourself on what would look different if the staff member was working from a place of well-being, and describe it to the staff member.

Visualize your conversation and several types of scenarios, and how you would handle each one.

Bridging to Resources

Before hosting the meeting with your staff member, you may wish to reach out to Human Resources for a list of the types of services and benefits the individual may be able to access. Resources could include, but are not limited to:

- Employee Assistance Program contacts
- School District disability or wellness team members
- Extended Health Benefit information
- The Human Resources team

- Community resources that HR feels may be helpful

Facilitating the Meeting

Park your assumptions and beliefs at the door. You will never know someone's full story, and you want to enter the meeting with a 'clean perspective' rather than a tainted picture based on previous interactions, rumours, or unconscious bias.

Begin the conversation directly and with empathy. Do not dance around the subject. Here are some examples of how you can start the conversation:

"Thank you for meeting with me today. I wanted to check in with you and see how you are doing."

"We have worked together for many years, and lately, I have noticed some changes (appearance, patience, demeanour). Are you okay?"

"You have always been amazing at connecting with students in the hallway, but lately, I have not seen you engaging with them. Is everything alright?"

"Is anything going on that may be distracting you these days? You have not seemed like yourself the past couple of weeks, and I just wanted to check in to see if you are okay."

3. Directing

Your role in the meeting is to be a compassionate and empathetic leader. You are there to:

- Show you care, as you have noticed some changes in how they normally 'show up'
- Assure the staff member that your conversation is confidential
- Determine whether there is anything in your role as an Administrator, within workplace policy, that you can do to support them at work
- Bridge the staff member to available resources

You are NOT there to:

- Learn all the details of your staff member's challenges. You do not need to know about

an individual's health situation or details of personal issues

- Make assumptions or be judgmental
- Analyze or solve the staff member's problem, unless their problem is specifically related to work and you are able, in your role as Principal or Vice-Principal, to make a difference
- Share your own personal experience and/or give a pep talk

If the staff member opens up about possible concerns that are impacting them at work, be open in your listening and thank them for sharing, and trusting you with the information. Acknowledge that you have heard them share that they are struggling, and that you will do what you can to support them within your role and the district's policies.

Should the staff member be very distraught during the meeting, and is open to speaking to someone, offer to immediately call the Employee Assistance Program. Call in, hand the phone to the staff member, and leave the room to give them privacy. It is a great idea to have the EAP number on your speed dial.

Remember: everything the individual shares with you needs to remain confidential unless, of course, they discuss harming themselves or others.

If you are concerned that the staff member may be at risk to harm themselves, you can call the BC Crisis Centre:

**1800SUICIDE
(1-800-784-2433)**

**310 Mental Health Support
310-6789
(no need to dial area code)
www.crisiscentre.bc.ca**

Have the staff member speak directly to the Crisis Counsellor. Should the staff member leave the meeting, and leave the building, and you are worried that they may harm themselves, never hesitate to call 911.



Generally, when a staff member is struggling at work, their issue can be placed in one of the three categories:

Health issue: The staff member is responsible for being proactive in addressing their health issue, accessing the right medical support, and complying with the treatment. As their leader, you are in a position to consider temporary workplace accommodation while the individual is undergoing a health process.

Personal issue: The staff member is responsible for taking action to mitigate the impact of their personal life issue on their ability to attend work in a safe, productive, and timely manner. As their leader, possibly in partnership with Human Resources depending upon the situation, you are in the position to offer temporary accommodation or a leave of absence if this is what the individual needs to get things in order. This can be supportive when the staff member is finding a retirement home for parents, or addressing legal issues in their divorce.

Workplace issue: In this situation, the staff member, and the workplace – including you as a leader – have a role in addressing any issues that are impeding the individual from successfully performing their job.

This table can define your role, depending on what the staff member reveals during your discussion.

Listen <i>What is the source of the problem?</i>	Direction <i>Direct to resources</i>	Responsibility <i>What is my role?</i>
Health Concerns Staff or family member health issues Medication effects Chronic conditions that flare up, deterioration etc.	Direct to Resources Physician EFAP Early intervention programs	Employee Responsibility Accommodation request * Schedule a follow-up date Outline goal(s) to review
Personal Concerns For example, marital or family issues, life change, legal problems, childcare, financial strains	Direct to Resources EFAP Early intervention programs	Employee Responsibility Accommodation request * Schedule a follow-up date Outline goal(s) to review
Work Concerns Conflict at work Ergonomic or safety needs Workload Skills needed Harassment Violence	Determine next steps & review resources Policy and procedures Consult HR/OH&S Action planning EFAP support	Leader and Employee Responsibility Accommodation request * Set plan and expectations Schedule a follow-up date Confirm desired outcomes and key points to review

* Administrator will want to coordinate with Human Resources

4. Action Plan and Follow-up

At the end of the meeting, commit to the actions you and/or the staff member will undertake to work towards returning the staff member to their regular level of performance. Set a date and time to follow up with the staff member to see how things are progressing.

At the follow up meeting, acknowledge improvements. If there are still challenges, reassess the expected steps and realistic timelines, then set another follow up date. Repeat this process as necessary.

These are not always comfortable conversations for you or your staff. However, addressing concerns early, and showing your willingness to listen and support, will go a long way to strengthening relationships, reducing assumptions, and improving workplace effectiveness.

Let us know if your chapter is interested in any specific training related to your role as a leader in supporting your team's well-being. BCPVPA can provide a two-hour course on how to have these challenging health/performance discussions, including what to do if the individual does not believe that there is anything wrong, and/or will not take adequate steps to address their situation.

Contact
Rochelle Morandini