

The best example leaders can set is well-being

Decades of glorifying overwork are hard to undo. But as the nation turns 60, sustainable performance depends on leaders modelling balance, not burnout.



A new, Singapore-specific study found individual-level interventions such as well-being apps, employee benefits and wellness programmes have limited impact, whereas leader well-being is the single strongest driver of organisational well-being. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

The Impact Measure study found that organisational well-being is the No. 1 enabler of organisational performance, which was measured across 12 widely recognised business metrics, including customer satisfaction, employee retention, sales growth, profitability, innovation cycles and market share.

The findings were unequivocal: Organisations with leaders who invested in their own well-being saw stronger results across the board – from higher customer satisfaction and faster innovation to reduced turnover and enhanced profitability. Leader well-being is not just good for people; it is good for business.

Investing in leader well-being is not a private indulgence. It is about building consistent practices and systems that sustain leaders' own health and effectiveness. This could include confidential coaching or peer forums for leaders to process

stress, incorporating well-being goals into leadership performance reviews, and providing tailored resources and space for leaders and managers to rest and renew.

Crucially, it requires leaders to role-model boundaries – switching off after hours, taking leave without guilt, and showing that rest is not a weakness but part of responsible leadership.

This means the well-being of leaders is a public responsibility with cascading consequences. Leaders who are exhausted, burnt out or disconnected transmit that state to their teams and organisations.

Conversely, when leaders are well, they make better decisions, create psychologically safe cultures and build more resilient, high-performing organisations.

Leaders cannot pour from an empty cup – the data shows that neither can their organisations.

The research shows that when leaders model rest, balance and optimism, they give permission

for others to do the same. They are not indulging themselves, but creating a virtuous circle for the organisation. Leaders who rest, regulate and role-model healthy behaviours ease the load on themselves and unlock higher performance from their teams.

This shift – from hustle to health, from “selfless” to self-care leadership – requires courage to break free from outdated expectations, including leaders’ own conditioning that more hours automatically mean better outcomes.

LEADING AND DOING MORE OF WHAT COUNTS

Beyond taking ownership of their well-being and their managers', the study also revealed five other high-impact levers that leaders need to drive that enable teams to thrive. Making work empowering and stimulating matters more for employees than reduced workload: Clarity, autonomy and

meaningful feedback shape both well-being and results.

Fostering a feeling of belonging proved nine times more powerful than performance bonuses in shaping well-being, reminding us that inclusivity must be lived, not merely promised.

The study also found that fairness in pay and promotion drives trust far more than additional perks – 46 times more impactful, in fact.

Supporting whole-person needs, from caregiving to financial literacy, across life stages acknowledges that employees do not leave their lives at the office door.

Values matter only when leaders consistently live them, not when they are reduced to slogans. And they “must be practised and modelled by leaders at all levels, and we must hold each other accountable to live by them”, National Council of Social Service CEO Tan Li San commented on the survey findings.

Taken together, these factors reframe well-being not as a programme, but as a practice of leadership and sustainable growth strategy.

A CALL TO ACTION

At SG60, there is a pressing need to reflect on the kind of leadership we need for the next 60 years. Our economy is in transition. Our society is grappling with inequality, demographic change and geopolitical uncertainty. In this context, the well-being of our workforce is not just a business concern – it is a matter of national resilience and competitiveness.

Well-being must be reframed as a hard performance lever – not just “soft perk” – that is central to leadership accountability. It challenges leaders to be vulnerable and human, not just strategic and efficient. It calls for a Singapore where performance does not come at the cost of people, but is fuelled by their well-being. This requires a fundamental shift in how we understand leadership. For decades, leadership was defined by vision, strategy and execution. Today, those remain necessary but are no longer sufficient. In a world of chronic stress and systemic uncertainty, the true test of leadership is the capacity to sustain human well-being while driving results.

In agreeing with the findings of the study, Mr Kelvin Ho, CEO of financial services group Nomura Singapore, said: “We want people to show up with energy and care – it’s on us as leaders to make the work engaging and growth-oriented.”

Indeed, this is not about coddling employees. It is about creating the conditions for peak performance that is sustainable. It is about recognising that human energy, trust and belonging are the real multipliers of productivity.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong’s call for a “we-first” society in his National Day Rally speech is also a call to leaders: Well-being must be a collective responsibility.

For corporate and public sector leaders, the message is clear: Well-being must move from being a delegated HR function to a core leadership responsibility – beginning with investing in leader well-being across the organisation and at every level. Boards must hold CEOs accountable, not only for financial results, but also for the well-being of their leaders and people, recognising that the two are inseparable. Investors must ensure well-being is on the board agenda for sustained performance.

It’s time for leaders to embody well-being and lead by example.

• Anthea Ong is a former Nominated Member of Parliament, social entrepreneur, mental health advocate and author. She is founder and chairwoman of WorkWell Leaders, a registered charity focused on leadership and organisational well-being.

• Dr Reuben Ng is an assistant professor and a behavioural and data scientist at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He is the principal investigator of the WorkWell Leaders Impact Measure study.