

a VITAL WorkLife article

# Ensure a Culture of Well Being with a Physician Well Being Audit

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**Ten questions  
to ask of  
yourself  
and your  
organization.**

**Stressed and burned out clinicians are**

**2X**

*as likely to leave their  
organizations as others.*



The well being of your physicians is physical, but it is also emotional—how they feel about themselves and the work they do. The pressures of contemporary medicine are causing more physicians, providers and nurses to feel increasingly unhappy with the profession. Many are leaving their positions and others are leaving medicine altogether. Having meaningful and effective strategies for employee retention is more important than ever before. Considering stressed and burned out clinicians are twice as likely to leave their organizations as others, making their well being a priority is essential. In short, you need to demonstrate you care.<sup>1</sup>

Are you prepared for that? Are you already doing it? To find out, you can carry out a physician well being audit. Ask yourself and your organization:

**1 Do you have systems in place that are fair and reasonable?** Well being isn't just how the physician feels inside; it's how external conditions impact her or him. These conditions can include home life, family, financial pressures and other things over which you have no control. But workplace conditions can be a large source of stress which you can help mitigate.

- Look at everything from your hiring practices to your promotion practices to how you evaluate workload and productivity.
- Are these clear and fair?
- What do your compensation and benefits look like?
- What does a positive organizational culture mean to you?
- Are you living your values as an organization? Is that what people are actually sensing and feeling? Are those values implemented by being embedded in work processes, in conversations and in decision-making?
- Is your organizational culture moving in the right direction, toward more openness, honesty and the inclusion of all voices?

**2 Do your employees feel valued?** Many organizations tout their retention and reward programs, but when it comes to recognition, people want more than a gift card. They want conversations in which leadership says, "I see you, I see what you contribute; it's valuable—and we as an organization recognize that value." Recognition needs to be very specific and very intentional.

**3 Do your leaders set the conditions for employees to thrive?** Are they taught how to be highly effective in terms of recognizing high-value work? Do they teach collaboration in ways that make people feel good about the work they're doing? Are they managing problems, people and situations that aren't working well? Many employees are trying to be the best they can be. But if they see others who are hindering progress in their organization, their department, their unit—or who are not being managed—they feel devalued in the good work they're doing.

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**4 Is everyone safe to express their thoughts and ideas on the mission and processes of the organization in a meaningful way and do they receive a respectful hearing?** Let's say an organization decides it's going to introduce a new program. In many organizations, leadership introduces the new program with, "Here are the implementation guidelines. Go to it." In an organization with a culture of well being, it's instead positioned as, "Here's what we're thinking. We'd really like to call on some key areas of your expertise to bring insights. Then we will incorporate some of those insights and ask everyone, does this make sense? Does this fit with our values, our mission and our vision?"

**“Physicians want to do the right thing, across the board. But we need to ask if the intense focus on metrics makes sense, especially if it’s getting in the way of physicians enjoying their work.”**

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**5 Do your physicians have the opportunity and time to take care of themselves and socialize?**

This could be time for meditation, time for the gym, time to obtain and eat a good lunch or time to get together with one another informally or in support groups to connect and share difficult issues and celebrate success. By supporting these options you can empower them to build resilience and reduce stress. With more to be accomplished with fewer people, it's easy to assume this is unobtainable. But we know that if people have an opportunity to recharge, their productivity increases dramatically and necessary duties will be completed.



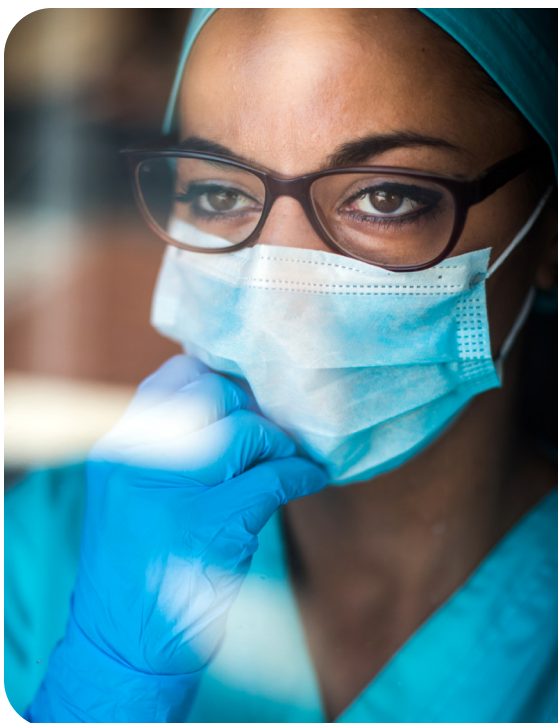
**Does your organization get the word out?**



**6 Do you have adequate resources to help those who are struggling with mental or emotional health issues?** If yes, do your physicians know about them and are they easy to access? People who are willing to take advantage of well being resources, to meet with a peer coach and take time to gain insights and skills are much more likely to be in a place of well being than those who don't.

In fact, most organizations don't lack resources, they have trouble implementing them in meaningful ways. Part of the problem is awareness. An organization may have a great employee assistance program, but its people often aren't aware of what's available to them. Does your organization get the word out?





**7 Are you committed to eliminating the stigma around seeking help for emotional or behavioral health issues?** If a physician is struggling and needs a consultation with a coach or counselor, or a “mental health day” can they do this without being ostracized? Do you consistently send the message that it’s normal for them to take care of themselves physically and emotionally?

**8 Do you understand trauma and trauma recovery?** Specifically the traumas your physicians have experienced, as well as the ones suffered by your patients? Do you accept the fact that your physicians may have been genuinely traumatized by what they have seen or what they have had to do, failed to do or been unable to do? And can everyone talk openly about it? Do you provide good support via professional or volunteer peer coaches?

**9 Do you ask the right questions to get feedback from physicians?** Feedback from physicians is crucial. It’s about asking the right questions, and then doing something substantive with the answers. If you make a survey and nothing happens, people feel that they’re asked to check off boxes but the organization isn’t willing to commit resources to solving the underlying problems they’ve indicated.

Here’s an *unhelpful* question: “Rate your experience with the EMR from 1 to 10.”

This focuses on good versus bad, like or not-like. We tend to try to make questions easily measurable like that. A *helpful* question is more nuanced and thoughtful: “How has the EMR contributed to your well being at work, in terms of workload, productivity and time spent with patients?” Making the questions actually connect with well being and how the physician feels is the way to get meaningful answers.

**Do you understand what your people undergo and how they feel?** Are you willing to take time to explore their experience? This may be the most important question of all in your audit.

Their problems may be about simple things, such as scheduling templates and support-staff numbers. Let's use a family practice doctor in a clinic as an example. Their colleagues see 24 people a day, so they are expected to see 24 - 26. They wish leadership would say, "In order to do that, a Medical Assistant would be helpful, and here's what else would make it work." If they had that help and support, they could see 26 or even 28 patients daily. However, this kind of evaluation—looking into the conditions that would make work enjoyable and bring satisfaction—often doesn't happen.

Another source of strain for physicians is keeping up with metrics. They may be so worried about documentation—the right payment codes, metrics measured and checked off—that they're not focusing on the things that make them feel like they're contributing the way they want to. After all, these numbers affect their compensation.

Physicians want to do the right thing, across the board. But we need to ask if the intense focus on metrics makes sense, especially if it's getting in the way of physicians enjoying their work.

All of this is not to say all input and everything that physicians want is right or should be accepted. But to address a problem you need to understand the issues underlying it, and also understand what someone who knows the problem well needs to help solve it. And that means sharing your physician's experience.

An audit like this isn't easy. Asking these questions of your people, yourself and your organization may be unsettling. But not to do it is to risk frustrating your people—and possibly losing them at a time when you can least afford that outcome.



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#### ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a physician-focused national behavioral health consulting practice supporting all dimensions of well being in the workplace with a multitude of solutions. Serving the U.S. healthcare industry since 2007, our national team of certified physician peer coaches and senior behavioral health consultants deliver life-changing well being solutions.

#### Sources:

1. Estimating institutional physician turnover attributable to self-reported burn-out and associated financial burden: a case study. <https://bmchealthserves.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-018-3663-z>  
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**How do you think your organization will score?**  
**Contact us to learn more about assessing the well being readiness of your organization and about our proven solutions to support your healthcare teams and foster a culture of care**

Contact us by phone at **877.731.3949**,  
online at [VITALWorkLife.com/contact-us](https://VITALWorkLife.com/contact-us)  
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