

a VITAL WorkLife article

Launching a Well Being Program— Important Steps for Success

By Vanessa Downing, PhD



Coming up in the article:

- What You Need to Begin
- Instituting the Program

As a healthcare leader, you've understood the importance of caring for the well being of your team. You've come to see the business case for robust physician well being resources—including their advantages in recruitment and retention. More importantly, you know the case is focused on care and relationships, with years of research showing time and again when people feel cared for and seen by empathic and genuine leaders, their teams tend to be stronger.¹

But if you don't have a formal program in place in your organization to support your team-based efforts, how do you begin the process of setting it up?



What You Need to Begin

As with any important and ambitious endeavor, there are **prerequisites** that need to be in place first.

Foster a shared understanding of what well being is and why it's important

This may require some education. Traditionally, well being has been thought of as something individuals are solely responsible for—getting enough rest, good nutrition and exercise. Or “the Program” is defined as what’s offered in the HR benefits package and whether or not the organization has a gym. But, these are only part of an organization’s well being picture and don’t encompass the whole story needed for success. Developing a shared understanding of how big an umbrella well being is, and identifying the many actionable opportunities that moderate the interaction between people and their work environment, can go a long way in helping everyone begin to speak a common language about well being across multiple disciplines.

Consider the impact of leadership

When organizations commit to asking powerful and far-reaching questions about their well being culture, a meaningful evaluation of leadership culture must follow. Some examples of questions worth exploring include:

- What is the leadership culture like at your organization, within teams and between teams?
- Is well being considered in your strategy, policies and approaches as are other mission-critical metrics like patient safety outcomes?
- How do the skills of the leaders end up impacting the motivation, the engagement of employees, the turnover rates or the rate of burnout? How do you measure this?
- How clear are the organization’s expectations about competencies leaders are expected to develop and demonstrate?
- How are leaders held accountable, and how is **their** development supported?

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Make a list of well being initiatives that already exist in the organization

Once you start doing some digging across departments, you might be surprised to learn the initiatives you already have in place that fall under the well being umbrella:

- Counseling or coaching opportunities
- Peer support programs that support clinicians following adverse events
- Mentoring or “buddy” programs that pair clinicians to provide support scaffolds
- Formalized professional development programming
- Workplace efficiency projects and other initiatives that enhance meaning-making and reduce what have been called “stones in shoes”
- Activities to build teamwork and camaraderie
- Practice redesign efforts that provide opportunities for clinicians to give input and experience more control over their own workflows
- Policies that prioritize psychological safety, especially when clinicians are asked to participate in event reviews or debriefs
- A focus on physical safety, whether we’re referencing needle sticks or workplace violence

Well being initiatives such as these might already be occurring in scattered pockets throughout the organization in a decentralized way that makes them difficult for staff members to find. There’s also a chance that many of these initiatives aren’t happening at all; remember that identifying what’s missing creates rich targets and opportunities that can be implemented with the support of internal and external resources. In any case, it’s easy for organizations to overlook what’s already being done and performing this sort of audit is a crucial step in building a strategy to address unmet needs. It can also be valuable to identify the utilization and return on existing programs. Are some benefits underutilized because no one really knows how to access them, or do they have bad experiences when they do? When it comes to support resources, word of mouth by trusted peers can be one of the most powerful drivers of utilization.

Review already collected data to identify needs

Are there engagement or pulse surveys, local or organization-wide, that give a sense of what the needs are and where help is most called for? Each organization is going to have a different well being “footprint” and a different appetite for taking on particular kinds of challenges and addressing pain points.

Carefully reviewing **survey data** can help target where to start, where the needs are, where the energy is. The next step is to move beyond survey data to **objective institutional data** like turnover rates, use of unplanned time off and safety and event reports—looking at the way things like event reviews and debriefings currently happen and exploring whether there are ways to build more psychological safety and support into those can greatly impact well being.



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Create conversations with stakeholders to build support for a strong culture

It's important to listen closely to the concerns of people inside and outside of your team or department, especially those who might not be sure of what well being really means, what its benefits are and of what's being asked of the organization. You need to find out what keeps people awake at night—is it the bottom line, turnover, clinical outcomes? Really listen, invite their ideas and even their skepticism. As support increases, you can begin to develop the next important element.

Establish strategic partnerships

Include the clinical and administrative realms—and identify people who will champion well being in the organization. Many clinicians and administrators who have been working in their particular settings for a long time already have deep relationships with others in various parts of the organization and understand the ecosystem. Their unique vantage points and perspectives make them potential champions of the well being initiative. In these discussions, listen for indications that these champions may be able to give time to activities like a task force, volunteering as a peer supporter or mentor, leading a pilot program, or something else. Among the most engaged champions, you may identify someone able to devote a portion of their time to well being work.

Set up pilot programs

A pilot program can test the provision of direct services to your healthcare workers; peer mentoring efforts or lunch-and-learn discussion groups focused on well being are ripe for piloting. Make these pilots time-limited and "bite-sized" activities that exceedingly busy healthcare workers will be able to engage in during their shifts and focus on one group, department or team at a time. A peer support pilot, for example, could initially tightly focus on solely helping physicians deal with adverse events. Over time, with proof of concept, the argument can be made for better resourcing the programs and scaling up.

Ensure your efforts serve several purposes—offering a service and creating a pipeline for information

Include data from the front lines—nearly all proactive and responsive services and pilot projects can provide opportunities to gather thematic information to share with leadership and advance advocacy efforts. Keep in mind that information pipelines are only as effective as they are efficient and trustworthy. It should be easy to submit information and ideas to a general email or in sidebar conversations, but should also guarantee confidentiality and protection from backlash.

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Instituting the Program

Then, when you're ready to institute a formalized well being program:

Define the scope of the program's work, keeping in mind this can evolve over time

Who is the audience? Some programs start with a tight focus, such as physicians only. Others are aimed at physicians and advanced practice clinicians. Others embrace all clinicians—nurses, physical therapists, anyone patient-facing. And some organizations say “anyone who works for us” is within the scope of who they're going to be attending to. Will the program look at work-environment solutions like practice redesign and measures to increase workplace efficiency? How will you balance proactive measures and reactive ones? What can be put in place to help ensure the program is sustainable and successful, and part of the culture long-term? These decisions about scope will drive a lot of the other decisions that follow.

Decide on resources

What type and size of staff do you need? What resources already exist in your community you could take advantage of? How can you connect to mental health clinicians who have expertise and interest in treating your healthcare workers? Will your organization provide mental health services, or will they be referred out? If mental health services will be provided, what approach to record-keeping will best protect confidentiality and promote utilization?

Consider confidentiality

Having a relationship with an outside source can solve certain problems. Reaching out for help is among the most vulnerable things physicians can do; these are people who have been trained to silence their needs in the service of others. The best peer-support programs give people multiple options. They ask, “Do you want to talk to somebody here who's in your specialty, who knows exactly what it's like to do obstetric surgery, or do you want to talk to a cardiac surgeon whom you're unlikely to run into again? Or would you rather talk to somebody who is outside of this organization who doesn't know any of the particular situations or people you'll be talking about?”

Select the right people for the well being teams

Make sure these folks aren't already spread too thin and have ample time and energy to participate and foster the program. It's also helpful to have an executive champion—someone leading the charge, who is heavily engaged and informs others about the importance and validity of a well being program.

Review the scope of well being initiatives as they compare to potentially overlapping work done

Collaborate with HR, talent development, system learning and other partners. Work to find out where services are clear, distinct and helpful. Where there is overlap and where there is friction and resistance with respect to goals. Careful, proactive review will also reveal where you might find new opportunities for partnership.

There's much more to be said about making a well being program work, but following these key steps can create a strong foundation to build upon.



Contact us to learn more about proven solutions for building or improving a well being program for your healthcare team and your bottom line.



Contact us by phone at 877.731.3949, or online at VITALWorkLife.com/contact-us to schedule Solution Discovery Call.



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Dr. Downing started her career as a cardiovascular psychologist working at the bedside of patients facing life-altering diagnoses. Her experiences on multidisciplinary teams included navigating intense system demands while fighting for the lives of patients. Her role as Director of the ChristianaCare Center for WorkLife Wellbeing emphasized advocacy for frontline workers, leadership development, and empowerment of individuals to influence culture change in meaningful and lasting ways.

Heading a team of psychologists and researchers, Vanessa became a national thought leader, providing mentorship, education and consultation to healthcare systems across the country as they established nascent programs. She has contributed to several well-known publications including the AMA's Steps Forward, The Ochsner Journal, the Physician Leadership Journal and given keynote address on topics such as "Reentering the Workplace During Covid-19" and "Creating Thriving Teams During Difficult Times".

Sources:

1. See, for example, Paquita C. de Zulueta, "Developing Compassionate Leadership in Health Care: An Integrative View," *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, December 18, 2016 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29355200/>

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.