Insights Series
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Well-being starts with culture

A healthcare leader's guide

Practical insights from Richard Safeer, Chief Medical Director, Employee Health and Well-being at Johns Hopkins Medicine

SIEMENS Healthineers

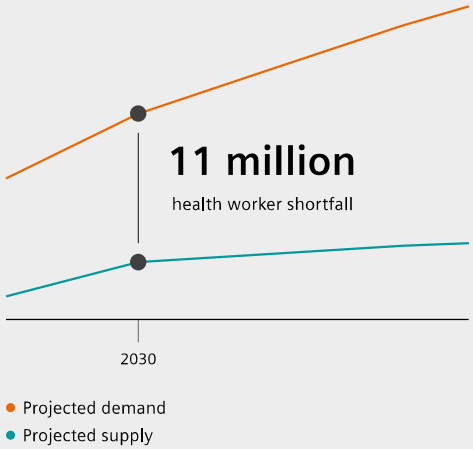
Introduction

The global healthcare sector is facing a workforce crisis of historic proportions. The World Health Organization projects a shortfall of 11 million health workers by 2030,[1] across countries and at every level of socioeconomic development; more affluent communities and countries are also affected. The causes are complex, yet the core challenges for providers remain recruitment and retention.

The global rise of healthcare worker burnout

Those who work in healthcare face unique pressures and demands. In 2024, almost half of all U.S. physicians reported symptoms of burnout.[2] Data from Europe shows that one in three doctors and nurses experiences symptoms of depression or anxiety.[3] But the issue extends beyond the U.S. and Europe – it is a global problem.

The global health workforce gap



The World Health Organization projects a shortfall of 11 million health workers by 2030.[1]

The critical role of workforce well-being in sustainable healthcare

As the world moves toward the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many healthcare providers now integrate the SDGs into their sustainability programs, highlighting well-being and workplace culture as key elements. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) can only be realized when a healthcare workforce is healthy and resilient, as their well-being underpins every health system. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) further emphasizes the need for fair, safe, and supportive working conditions.

Supportive workplace conditions make a difference

Prevalence of mental health issues in doctors and nurses

51%

Without social support

17%

With social support

Mental health difficulties are substantially less prevalent among doctors and nurses who receive frequent social support from colleagues and supervisors compared with those who do not.

Mental Health of Nurses and Doctors survey in the European Union, Iceland and Norway. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2025

The economic consequences of workforce instability

Improving healthcare working conditions is not only a human priority but also a financial priority, as the instability caused by the turnover of healthcare workers generates significant costs. In the U.S. alone, workforce instability is estimated to cost the healthcare system approximately $4.6 billion annually.[4] Clinicians leaving also results in a loss of expertise, institutional knowledge, and diminished continuity of care, all of which impact quality, safety, patient satisfaction, and an organization's reputation.

Clearly, retaining healthcare workers once they have been hired and trained is preferable. But how can this be achieved?

Richard Safeer, MD, is a leading authority on the topic of workplace well-being. He comments frequently on the subject on his blog and is the author of the book "A Cure for the Common Company: A Well-Being Prescription for a Happier, Healthier, and More Resilient Workforce". Dr. Safeer actively puts his ideas and expertise into practice, serving as Chief Medical Director of Employee Health and Well-being at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore, where he leads the Healthy at Hopkins employee health and well-being strategy.[5]

The statement that "greater employee well-being is desirable" provides little in the way of direction or tangible guidance. In fact, 80% of human resource professionals at large employers claim to strive for a culture of health. Part of the problem, as Dr. Safeer notes, is that "most people don't know what a workplace culture of health is. And if you think you know, it's probably a different definition than the person next to you."

Many factors contribute to workplace well-being: workload, staffing levels, employee autonomy, leadership support, adequate resources, and psychological safety. But without the right workplace culture, no single program or initiative can create a sustainable environment of well-being.

Building a culture of well-being

An organizational culture of well-being encompasses things like how work environments are designed, how decisions are made, and how highly human factors are prioritized alongside operational goals. It is an intangible element present in everything from day-to-day operations to long-term planning.

A healthcare workplace is in many ways a uniquely challenging environment for such a culture to flourish. Complex hierarchical structures, competing priorities, high-pressure situations, and well-established norms and processes can all serve as obstacles. Culture alone is not a magical cure-all, but meaningful, lasting well-being can only be achieved if such a culture is in place. As awareness and research on this topic continue to expand – particularly in the complex environment of healthcare – it is increasingly important to translate these insights into practical strategies.

Richard Safeer, together with his colleague Judd Allen, has identified six factors that serve as the foundation for a workplace culture of well-being.[6] This framework, based on scientific evidence as well as decades of experience, offers a structured way for leaders to influence behavior, align priorities, and embed health into the daily life of their workplace and employees. It has served as a practical guide for organizations – including Johns Hopkins Medicine – seeking to establish and maintain a culture of well-being.

The six building blocks for a workplace well-being culture

1 Shared values
Values that are chosen and embraced by both employees and leadership.

2 A positive social climate
An environment where people feel connected, motivated and optimistic about the organization's mission.

3 Establishment of norms
Shared expectations that shape everyday behavior at work.

4 Culture connection points
Formal and informal organizational practices that link culture with daily actions.

5 Peer support
Mutual assistance among colleagues to promote healthy work practices and personal well-being.

6 Leadership engagement
Active leadership involvement in prioritizing and modeling well-being.

1 Shared values

In many large healthcare organizations, the well-being of employees is frequently overshadowed by the pursuit of patient satisfaction, financial performance, or technological progress. Yet, there is clear evidence that creating a culture that prioritizes employee well-being, starting with values, leads to broader success including in quantifiable areas like patient safety, staff retention, and organization profitability. An organization's values set the course for how that organization makes decisions, behaves, and prioritizes its resources.

Values must be clearly defined and should be embraced and lived by those at every level of the organization including senior management. They should be communicated frequently throughout the organization, ideally in a way that is easily remembered and repeatable.

2 A positive social climate

A good social climate is essential for achieving a happier, healthier workplace with more resilient teams. Teams that work together for longer periods of time, collaborate, and trust one another can support each other's well-being in ways that are not possible with colleagues who don't share the same cohesiveness. This support extends from developing healthier habits to managing crises with less turbulence to simply enjoying their working day and the time they spend together.

As with shared values, the benefits of a positive social climate often translate directly into business benefits including higher employee retention, higher trust, greater employee collaboration and resilience, and improved problem-solving and efficiency. A positive social climate fills a very basic human need. Employees with social support are less likely to get sick, and likely to recover more quickly from illness. There is even evidence suggesting that the absence of social connectedness increases our health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[7]

Questions to ask yourself as a leader:

- What opportunities do we offer employees to socialize?
- What processes do we have in place for new hires to quickly feel like they are part of the team?
- Do we treat all voices with equal respect?

"We have to think of well-being as a team sport."

Richard Safeer, MD

3 Establishment of norms

The behaviors that feel "normal" at work strongly influence how people act – and ultimately define an organization's culture. In the workplace, norms shape whether employees feel comfortable taking a lunch break or feel compelled to answer emails after dinner. If the entire team takes a lunch break, employees are more likely to eat lunch away from their desks. If the team answers emails in the evening, employees may feel pressure to do the same. Changing norms requires persistence, and progress depends on alignment across teams and leaders. But even incremental changes can gradually reset expectations.

Example:
At Johns Hopkins, they successfully shifted norms around food and beverages by eliminating oversized sugary drinks, pricing water lower than soda, marking healthy drinks and placing them at eye level, and limiting soda to 20% of available options. Healthy beverages also became the default at meetings and events, with only a few exceptions. Changes like these sent a consistent message: personal choice continues to be respected, but healthier choices are actively encouraged.

4 Culture connection points

Culture connection points influence the actions of employees and can help to reinforce – or to undermine – behavior that contributes to health and well-being. These touchpoints – such as communication, storytelling, and policy – show up in everyday practices like cafeteria pricing or how meeting agendas are structured. They represent the confluence of employee experience with employee well-being. There are a dozen different types of culture connection points that can be intentionally used to influence employee behavior and attitudes.

Positive connection points can consist of inspiring communication that helps sustain motivation, or authentic stories from peers or leaders which resonate far more deeply than statistics. Policies, although often overlooked, provide structure and continuity by embedding health into formal business practice.

5 Peer support

Few employees can achieve their well-being goals on their own. Peer support – colleagues encouraging one another, listening, and holding one another accountable – helps to fulfill this need. It is most effective when employees with shared goals engage in safe spaces, practicing skills such as listening, goal-setting, and offering encouragement. Over time, strong peer support embeds well-being into everyday culture and builds lasting momentum within the team.

Example:
The Healthy at Hopkins Champions Program mobilizes employees across their 42,000-person workforce to promote health within their teams, making it possible to address problems not only with managers but also with peers. In some situations, an employee may not feel comfortable raising an issue with a manager. A peer, however, can often provide a safer and more understanding environment in which issues can be raised. Hopkins Champions act as role models, guide colleagues to available resources, and provide feedback from the ground level. They meet monthly with the well-being office and some are trained in tools such as HeartMath®, a mindfulness practice that connects positive thinking with heart-focused breathing. With this kind of peer-to-peer support, Johns Hopkins ensures that well-being is not just a top-down initiative but embedded into everyday routines and daily culture.

Blood pressure strategy:

Johns Hopkins uses blood pressure as a key metric to track workforce health. Since the program began, normal blood pressure screenings have risen, while high blood pressure readings have declined, suggesting that employees are taking steps toward healthier lifestyles.

6 Leadership engagement

Leadership engagement is the fuel that powers all the building blocks. Leaders shape what is prioritized, how teams interact, and which behaviors are modeled. Their influence extends across values, climate, norms, peer support, and culture connection points.

When leaders openly prioritize well-being – by placing it on meeting agendas, practicing healthy behaviors themselves, or removing barriers to participation – they send a clear message that well-being matters. Visible role modeling during the workday and even brief well-being exercises during team meetings can make well-being tangible for employees. Leaders who show vulnerability by acknowledging their own challenges foster trust, strengthen social bonds, and create conditions for a healthier workplace culture. As Dr. Safeer notes, "a leader needs to be a role model for well-being. If it's not visible, say they meditate during lunch, they must then communicate that to their team."

Questions to ask yourself as a leader:

- How do you support your team members in leading a healthy and balanced lifestyle?
- When and how do you bring up the topic of well-being within your team?
- In what ways do you embody and visibly demonstrate the healthy habits and well-being practices you encourage your team to follow?

Example:
At Johns Hopkins, leaders regularly share their own well-being practices in the weekly Wellness Newsletter, demonstrating to employees that leadership includes self-care and reinforcing the idea that supporting well-being is part of every leader's role.

These six building blocks – shared values, building a positive social climate, establishing norms, culture connection points, peer support, and leadership engagement – are interdependent. Addressing them together creates a multiplier effect, accelerating progress toward a sustainable well-being culture.

Getting started with leading change

Culture is one of the most widely discussed priorities in leadership, yet it remains poorly understood and often does not receive adequate attention. It is important to keep in mind that culture doesn't shift simply because a new narrative is introduced. It shifts when systems change, when leaders take personal risks, when norms are not just declared but intentionally shaped and demonstrated

Two of the most fundamental challenges to achieving a workplace culture of well-being are operational: Where do I begin? And: How do I measure success?

How can I get started?

Establishing a culture of well-being can appear challenging, but, like any significant transformation, it begins with clarity of purpose and a defined starting point.

Three steps can guide leaders toward meaningful action:

1. Appoint someone with suitable expertise to design and guide your well-being strategy – ideally someone with skills in change management, organizational health, or health promotion. Assigning such an initiative to someone who lacks the relevant skills and experience, even with the best intentions, can jeopardize its success.

2. Build the business case, collect baseline data and ensure the strategy is evidenced-based. This is essential for ensuring organization-wide buy-in and ongoing support.

3. Set realistic goals. Often a three- to five-year horizon can be a viable timeframe in which to develop and achieve defined goals. Cultural change takes time, and consistency and continuity are essential.

How do I measure success?

As mentioned above, the success of an organization-wide well-being initiative demands measurement. This is essential to maintain support, both from employees and from senior leadership. As Dr. Safeer points out, "You can't improve what you don't measure." Without meaningful data, leaders risk mistaking intentions for impact. Clear evidence of success improves morale, making it easier for people to feel part of an initiative. Measurement can also identify areas where efforts need to be adjusted to obtain optimal results.

A purely quantitative approach rarely tells the whole story; it is important to include qualitative measurement as well, with data obtained through interviews, observation, and surveys.

Example:
At Johns Hopkins Medicine, this approach includes the CDC's Worksite Health ScoreCard and a workplace culture survey examining leadership engagement, employee experience, and perceptions of organizational well-being. A validation process – through policy reviews, communication audits, and onsite assessments – ensures the organization's practices are accurately represented.

Why resource constraints are not a reason to wait

Another argument often heard from decision-makers is that they lack the time and money for such an effort. In hospitals under pressure from full wards, tight budgets, and rising demand, well-being is often treated as a luxury to be addressed "later". This reflects a misunderstanding about the benefits of a well-being culture, including the tangible business benefits. Postponing such efforts fuels the very challenges plaguing health systems, including rising turnover, soaring recruitment costs, and a loss of team stability. This can result in half-hearted efforts like treating well-being as essentially a "communications strategy" or viewing it as an "HR program" rather than a holistic, organization-wide effort.

Bringing it all together

To successfully build a healthcare workplace culture of well-being, strategic change management is essential. Culture does not shift through isolated projects or slogans, but through deliberate, organization-wide processes.

The case for prioritizing workforce well-being is strong. When clinicians and caregivers are overwhelmed, patient safety, care quality, and trust can be compromised. Burnout has been shown to increase the likelihood of medical errors and to erode the overall care experience. Financially, the cost of turnover and disengagement can be onerous.

On the other hand, organizations that invest in well-being can see measurable returns through higher retention, stronger engagement, and more stable staffing. Strategically, in an era of chronic workforce shortages, a culture that protects and empowers people can be a meaningful differentiator, driving performance, resilience, and the capacity to deliver excellent care. Building such a culture cannot be achieved by one leader or department alone. It requires shared ownership and alignment across all organizational levels.

Dr. Richard Safeer's Six Building Blocks of a Well-Being Culture offer a practical framework for building such a culture – turning well-being from an abstract ideal into an operational reality.[5]

The health of the workforce ultimately shapes the health of the system itself and determines whether healthcare organizations can truly thrive.

Are you already leading in a way that supports well-being?

This short self-check helps you uncover where your leadership already supports well-being – and where small shifts could have a big impact.

› **Test yourself**

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Dr. Richard Safeer is a leading expert on workplace well-being culture and organizational health. At Johns Hopkins Medicine, he leads the Healthy at Hopkins strategy to embed well-being throughout the organization. He co-developed a framework for workplace well-being culture identifying six essential building blocks and expanding it into a practical guide for building healthier, more resilient organizations in his book "A Cure for the Common Company" (Wiley, 2023). He continues to share insights on workplace well-being through LinkedIn, richardsafeer.com, public speaking and podcast appearances.

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[1] *Early detection, accurate diagnosis, individualized therapy selection, simulation and planning, continuous monitoring, and aftercare.*

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