

# The real feelgood factor

Well-being is about more than yoga in your lunch break. It means a sustained effort to support and encourage employees to meet the organisation's goals and embrace change, says Professor Cary Cooper



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**W**hat do you think the government would like you to achieve as the manager of a business unit in the public sector?

What about the following?

- Improved productivity and work performance from staff
- Improved financial viability
- Increased attraction and retention of the best staff
- Excellent behaviour towards customers
- More effective learning and problem-solving
- Lower levels of sickness absence.

I suspect that most managers would be pretty satisfied with delivering these outcomes for their employer, but it's also likely that they would consider delivering on so many different fronts unachievable. However, in reality all of these outcomes are achievable by working on improving just one aspect of organisational life. That aspect is well-being.

Many people in the public sector would be surprised, even cynical, about this revelation because the potential value of well-being in the workplace is not well understood. True, well-being has become highly visible in recent years, both in the media and on the government agenda (for example, the strategy for a healthy police service and the Foresight mental capital and mental well-being project). However, very often the employees get, or are given, the wrong end of the stick. Ask the average public sector worker what well-being at work means to them and nine out of 10 will mention massages, yoga or, at best, counselling.

Well-being is not something to be fleetingly achieved by doing nice things for employees; it is a fundamental state achievable by sustained effort on the part of the employer and employee alike. It is about being sufficiently challenged by your goals and sufficiently supported in achieving them by the organisation. This concept of well-being holds much more value for working life and I'd like to explain some of the evidence for the benefits it can bring.

What is it that employees want? If you want to tap the reservoir of discretionary effort and energy that employees hold you have to start with this question. The answer is that employees (and indeed all people) want to feel good. Of course, what makes a person feel good is very specific to them – for example, acquiring a minimal amount of money could make one person feel great, but for another giving away a large sum could have the same effect. Essentially though, the key motivator is the same for all of us – to feel good.

Another way of thinking about feeling good is that it's a state where people have a sense of psychological well-being (PWB). But people do not

achieve PWB by sitting with their feet up for long periods; it comes from striving towards difficult goals that they think are worthwhile, with the support of their manager and the organisation. It is this state of PWB when implemented across whole organisations that can deliver measurable business benefits.

And the research backs this up. In one study, data from nearly 8,000 separate business units in 36 companies were analysed and revealed that engagement/well-being was linked to business unit performance, predicting customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability, employee turnover and sickness absence levels (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002). Another study, conducted over a five year period, showed a strong link between levels of PWB and work performance (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001).

So there is strong research evidence for this, but how can it help with the challenges currently facing the public sector? Last month in this column, Ivan Robertson talked about the change agenda driving the capability reviews, and discussed the strain caused by asking a smaller number of people to achieve a larger number of more difficult goals. The link here is that people with lower levels of PWB are more likely to see the ambiguity of change as threatening and therefore react negatively. If high levels of PWB were common in the public sector, the reaction to constant change would almost certainly be more positive and resilient than at present.

In terms of recruitment and retention, the public sector is struggling more than ever to attract and retain the best staff in the face of competition from the private sector. Becoming an "employer of choice" because you offer staff an environment where PWB is a given can make a big contribution to winning this battle.

On another front, the government is turning up the heat on customer satisfaction after investing heavily in improving services – now it is expecting to see results. In the field of customer service, the idea of the "satisfaction mirror" is well established, in that there is substantial evidence for a link between the engagement and job satisfaction of the employee and the satisfaction of the customer (Berthardt et al, 2000). So improving the service itself is one thing, but if those delivering it are not engaged and motivated an ultimate improvement in customer satisfaction is highly unlikely.

These are just a few of the areas that could benefit if the government gets well-being right. It is not the cure for every ill, but it is a crucial underlying aspect of organisational life that will help to make reform successful and sustainable in the public sector.