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A **COVID-19** Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellness Team #21

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Input your submission below. Please remember that you have 1500 words to share your insights.

Workplace Wellbeing Ecosystem– defined by autonomy and employee choice

As a team, we developed an overarching structure that frames our ideas, accommodating our collective thoughts while allowing for an abundance of individual contributions.

The word 'Ecosystem' defines our approach. An ecosystem is a community of living organisms. We have adapted the concept of an ecosystem to encompass our group's collective thinking while integrating a series of individual perspectives on the meaning of future workplace wellbeing.

We envision that an employee will be able to choose the work environment that best suits their workstyle. This autonomy speaks to one of the key tenets of the meaning of happiness and wellbeing. It gives the employee power to choose the space to be productive, healthy and thrive.

Our prescription is to advance workplace wellbeing beyond the physical workspace and define it through the support of employee health and wellness at home, the office, community and in connection with the environment. Workplace Wellness Ecosystem provides an abundant environment of options fueled by choice in the way, where and how people choose to work.

We have developed a series of concepts that frame our perspectives under this structure. Each participant's ideas are incorporated while being connected to the ecosystem.

Global/regional, environment and community interconnectedness

As we emerge from COVID-19, we now have a renewed sense of empathy and connection to our communities and world around us. With this shared understanding, we can strive to embrace the power of collective concern and use it to enhance our personal and professional wellbeing. This acknowledges that my wellbeing contributes to the health of others around me. We need to be intentional moving forward about how we inhabit the space that we live in, the cities, countries, and cultures that we call home. The essence of the ecosystem is that we all draw energy from one another and ultimately are codependent on the success of one another. This connected approach and elevated sense of wellbeing flourishes when we all are living in one harmonious system even though we live individual lives and are contributing to our individual companies.

Increasing the Kindness Quotient (KQ)

Kindness to ourselves and others in the workplace needs to pervade all levels of leadership. This trait does not come with a title; however, in many workplaces, it is seen to start in the C-Suite. When leadership at the top demonstrates kindness, humility, and thoughtfulness for the teams they work with, it shows a level of caring that all employees are inspired to model in their everyday lives.

The mindset of the leadership team needs to be one of willingness to participate in these types of programs and empathy toward the employees who are performing the tasks that make up the corporation's day-to-day efforts.

Kindness is also measured by one's ability to show true humility, which is not to say, "I am humbled by what has happened by COVID-19". True humility comes from introspection and the willingness to put oneself in the shoes of the person or people of whom one is thinking. It is to think of others and what they are going through and how you can help.

Leaders should be vulnerable in front of their teams. Our teams know that we are going through difficult times, even if we feel we need to appear to be superheroes. Expressing vulnerability will open up conversations and communication that allows for healing that will be much needed.

In addition, corporate culture can be updated to include employee wellbeing and encourage mindfulness, self-care and kindness to oneself and others. This new culture should include physical and mental exercise throughout the day.

To determine the **right** new corporate culture, leaders who will drive the decisions will need to actively focus on kindness, thoughtfulness, and humility when they engage with all employees. This important concept ensures that everyone feels safe and secure in proffering their honest opinions and that leadership takes those opinions into consideration.

When everyone's voice is heard, people feel more empowered to act on and protect the culture and to adhere to the goals and mindset the community created together. It feels more like a family, which gives a sense of comfort. When employees are free to be mindful of their own wellbeing and that of those around them, they feel a sense of camaraderie, which leads to more productive teamwork.

Thoughtful Refresh and Re-Activation of our Physical Space

The key enabler for creating a more harmonious ecosystem will be the refresh we make to the physical workspace. As part of the engagements of leaders with employees, employees should be included in decisions and have a voice about their individual workspaces. A building in an urban location will need different amenities than one in a suburb. In each location, the employees who are returning to these spaces will have varying needs and each should be considered.

Physical changes that can be incorporated into any environment include natural lighting, access to outdoor environments including plants, and work/life balance programs. Natural lighting helps reduce eye strain and fatigue, and it should be introduced wherever possible.

Having natural spaces for people to take a break during the day is also very important. Nature paths for walks, courtyards for meditations or breaks outside, meeting spaces with walls of living plants and rooftop gardens are all ways to incorporate nature into the workspace and encourage employees to connect with nature. Plants are a great addition because they are shown to give people's minds a break from work activities. They are natural relaxers, filtering air and bringing more oxygen to the ecosystem.

Work/life balance is also important. Employees need to feel secure in their ability to take time for themselves, whether it be to take care of a loved one (human or animal), to heal from a sickness or for a vacation. The security of being able to take these breaks and come back to work re-energized will encourage employees to be their best selves.

No ecosystem is complete without family. Imagine having an environment bereft of life! Our partners, siblings, children, parents, extended family, and pets are the strength behind the scenes that help us do our work. The future workspace will support all employees' needs and create the space for family engagement and support.

What new protocols should be introduced into the workplace?

Overall, it is very difficult to adopt new health behaviors during stressful times. Any programs to help employees manage their mental health during normal times can be beneficial for the future. As such, organizations should focus on education that helps employees learn how to:

- 1) establish healthy coping mechanisms for mental resilience
- 2) understand and recognize their individual mental health needs

- 3) learn essential strategies for supporting colleagues/direct reports during times of stress
- 4) identify and prevent key health factors such as diabetes and lung disease
- 5) get involved in wellness and fitness programs

Organizations need to consider that issues surrounding mental health will be more prevalent than before. Orgs should prepare to support employees who will have gone through trauma, death of loved ones, or prolonged isolation. They may also be faced with employees who are experiencing burnout due to blurred work/life/childcare boundaries; suffering from depression and anxiety; or managing a recurrence of past mental health issues. In anticipation of these challenges, organizations should:

- Be more proactive to create a culture of openness about mental health and reduce stigma, including communications from workplace leadership
- Ensure that employees have proper mental health coverage
- Adopt increased flexibility in the workplace to allow employees to adjust their schedule according to various mental health needs
- increased interpersonal support and availability of sick days
- Adjust their physical environment after having spent months adjusting to working from home and undergoing a period of high stress
- Creating resources for well-being including e-documents and training that can be made available for employees.
- Foster social-connections and provide material help that people need to overcome isolation which has been associated with increased risks of diseases and death.

Moving towards the “Next Normal” with a Workplace Wellbeing Ecosystem

An ecosystem built on a base of kindness - practiced consistently by all members of the organization starting at the top will set our future workplaces for success. Employees who feel heard, safe, and included are more productive and loyal to the organization they work for.

Proving that the employees are heard is the second step. Demonstrating this is done in two ways: first incorporating employee feedback into the non-physical elements such as the new culture and provided programs; and second by reactivating the physical environment through space that is designed to fit the employee and amenities that enable comfort, safety and productivity.

As individuals, communities and organizations are mobilizing to move into the “next normal”, prioritizing the Workplace Wellbeing Ecosystem - centered on individual behaviors, a focus on mental and physical wellness, wrapped by the physical space we occupy with an interconnectedness to our communities and an environmental consciousness will be critical to a new and successful future.