

# For healthy leadership, why strong is better than wrong



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People that are well consistently do well, and will sustain that performance over time. That is not to say that people who aren't well can't perform well. During the disruption and uncertainty of the pandemic we saw high levels of productivity but also an increasing numbers of people experiencing chronic stress, burn-out and mental health problems. Which is neither safe nor sustainable, so leading with healthy and well ways of working is critical to success.

## **Wrong doesn't work**

When people are living from their stress response, wired and overtired, they can't bring their best self to work. And as their energy drops, their productivity deteriorates, their confidence and capability is also negatively impacted creating a negative capability loop. When we become overly focused on what is wrong, what is not working and what needs to be fixed, it can trigger an internal fear response which kick starts our survival response of fight, flight, or freeze.

When stressed or feeling unsafe, the brain prioritises our survival response resourcing at the expense of essential performance functionality like problem solving, perspective taking and innovating. Limiting our access to the capabilities that we need to perform well.

## **Healthy leadership is a skillset and can be learned**

Most of us move into leadership and management roles with clarity around the strategies, targets, projects and results we are expected to deliver. There is an investment in training for induction and then ongoing time dedicated to work-in-progress meetings, either one-on-one or in teams, and the performance expectations come with a range of measures for assessing our levels of performance and success.

Less explicit and often more informal, unwritten, and unmeasured is an assumption that we will also manage the wellbeing of our team within the cracks of our leftover time. But when we don't manage the interpersonal dynamics well, leave those who are unwell to struggle, allow interpersonal conflict to fester or accept poor performance, we undermine both our own health and performance and that of our overall team.

## Safe, well, strong

There are three key strategies and skill sets that will support leaders to develop strong, sustainably successful teams:

1. Psychological safety as the foundation of a healthy team.
2. Wellbeing as an enabler of performance.
3. Strengths-based leadership for sustainable high performance.

## Safe at work includes psychologically safe

Psychological safety is when there is a shared belief amongst all team members that it is safe to express themselves, share diverse ideas, debate different opinions, and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. When we provide a psychologically safe environment at work all of our team members have the ability to contribute and do their best.

## Wellbeing is an enabler of performance, not a reward for results

Leaders need to prioritise health and self-care as a building block of team performance.

Many of us still operate with an industrial age model of work which focuses on and measures success by effort, productivity, and revenue. Where people prioritise work first, and fit health, wellbeing, rest, and recovery into whatever time is left. The story we tell ourselves sounds something like this, 'if I work hard and achieve my targets, I then deserve happiness and wellbeing.' But this equation is broken and backwards. Over 10-years of research shows that when we prioritise wellbeing and happiness first, we have better productivity, sales, creativity, relationships, and resilience, and less burnout.

## Strong wins out over wrong

Human-beings have an inbuilt negativity bias. We are constantly looking out for the risks, dangers and threats in order to maintain our survival. And we take this attitude to work, to our conversations, and to the way we run our meetings. But our brains on positive perform significantly better than when we are at negative, neutral or stressed. And we learn, develop and grow, and gain confidence by focusing on what is working, using our strengths, reinforcing what is working well, and from the optimism that comes from positive emotions.

[Kim Cameron's studies](#) on positive leadership show that at organisational level, we have better engagement, less turnover and higher performing businesses. So by taking a positive, strengths-based leadership approach where we are deliberately looking for what went well, what is working, recognising effort, creativity and new ways of working, recognising and rewarding innovation, small steps and the wins, we are not only cultivating satisfaction, engagement and better relationships, but also a performance advantage.

We are well overdue putting the healthy into high performance. [Wellbeing at work research](#) consistently demonstrates that employee wellbeing, recognition and support is closely linked to productivity, job satisfaction and overall organisational performance.

## About the author

Fleur Heazlewood, author of *Leading Wellbeing – A leaders guide to mental health conversations at work*, is a leadership expert, speaker, and founder of the Blueberry Institute. She works with leaders to create healthy, high performing teams and organisations. Fleur has trained over 3000 leaders in mental health mastery, future-fit resilience, and positive leadership skills. Her first book *Resilience Recipes*, a practical guide to better personal wellbeing won best Health and Wellbeing Book for 2022.