Perspectives on Wellbeing at Work from Harvard’s VPHR, Manuel Cuevas-Trisán

Manuel Cuevas-Trisán joined Harvard as Vice President for Human Resources last August, coming from Northwestern University. Manuel shares his thoughts on the critical role wellbeing plays in supporting employees, especially during a period of unprecedented workplace change due to the pandemic.

**Question: What is workplace wellbeing and why is it important?**

**Manuel Cuevas-Trisán:** Fundamentally, I view the question of wellbeing in the workplace as an organizational commitment to seeing people in the full spectrum of their identity and their needs. As employees, we all aspire to excel, to contribute optimally to the mission of the university, but our ability to fulfill this aspiration is highly variable. Many circumstances—some work-related, others unrelated work—affect our wellbeing and thus our ability to contribute on any given day. We know that unwell employees make unwell organizations and, conversely, that investing in employee wellbeing strengthens organizations. So my notion of wellbeing is about seeing employees holistically, in their full humanity, not just through the exclusive lens of their output. In practice, this means acknowledging factors such as mind, body, family, community, physical safety, shelter, food, and financial security as integral to overall wellbeing, and making investments in ways that target these factors and make us the employer of choice. This perspective is increasingly important to our external candidates, and we also know that it is more relevant than ever to our current workforce.

**Question: Has our understanding of wellbeing changed during the pandemic?**

**Cuevas-Trisán:** Our understanding of wellbeing during the pandemic has evolved and my sense is that organizations are taking wellbeing more seriously than ever. Prior to the pandemic, the notion that investing in wellbeing is good for business was well established. But experiencing a pandemic has made this understanding more tangible. We are now well into the second pandemic year; COVID-19 has severely shaken our individual and collective sense of safety and wellbeing. I describe it as disruption to the “collective rhythm” of our lives. We now must plan for what we used to do reflexively. Our social interactions are less spontaneous, impaired by distance or masks, or mediated by technology. The most basic expressions of connection and affection, such as a handshake or a hug, can be experienced as risks. And at work—on campus or at home—we are looking inward, grappling with questions of meaning and purpose, in ways that we have not done routinely before.

Our investments in employee wellbeing help offset or lighten some of this load: child and elder care, paid time off, physical and mental health supports, flexible and alternative work
arrangements, financial and retirement planning resources, among others, signal to our employees that we see them holistically and care for them not merely for the work they deliver, but as full participants of our broad community.

While meaning and purpose fuel our resolve to do right by all members of our community, our understanding of the cascading effects of decisions, both at a personal and at a leadership level, is evolving. Our challenge is to integrate altruistic intentions with competing interests that can be very difficult to reconcile. We continue to learn from our successes and our failures, and the pandemic has been (to put it mildly) an “education” in the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that have a direct impact on people’s wellbeing.

And there are two other takeaways from this pandemic that I would highlight: first, the growing de-stigmatization of mental health issues; and second, the need to close digital accessibility gaps so that those with and without disabilities have the same ease of access to content and programs. We are speaking frequently and openly about these issues. And we see ongoing investment in these areas as integral to the wellbeing of our employees and their sense of safety and belonging in our community.

**Question: What are Harvard’s key wellbeing support resources? Where do you think we do a good job and would you like to see us do better in the future?**

**Cuevas-Trisán:** We do very well in multiple areas, which doesn’t mean there isn’t room for improvement. For example, our caregiving resources and our health and welfare plans are comprehensive, our time off and short- and long-term disability benefits are robust. Additionally, EAP services, mindfulness classes, learning and development courses, and retirement and financial planning programs provide excellent foundations for employees’ immediate and long-term wellbeing.

But we have opportunities, starting with identifying and sharing internal best practices. This is important because success in the wellbeing space does not depend solely on what programs or benefits we offer, but how they are supported and administered at the school or unit level. Harvard’s de-centralized operational model leads to very variable outcomes and experiences. So, in addition to strategic investments in growing areas of need, such as caregiving and mental health, we must identify pockets of excellence within our system and scale up the most promising practices.

**Question: How does workplace wellbeing connect to institutional priorities, like sustainability, diversity, inclusion and belonging, engagement, recruitment, and retention?**

**Cuevas-Trisán:** Organizations operate like living and dynamic organisms. Collectively, they don’t just aim to survive, they want to thrive. If Harvard has endured and thrived as long as it has it is because its people have been not only smart, but adaptable and resilient. They have stepped up to the challenges of the times by making the investments necessary to continue thriving. The challenges of our time --- diversity, equity and inclusion, ecological and organizational sustainability, our ability to attract and engage the most diverse and innovative talent--- can only
be met by a healthy and resilient workforce. A comprehensive wellbeing strategy recognizes and intersects with each of these institutional priorities.

**Question: What's in it for supervisors and leaders to be supportive of workplace wellbeing? And how do we support them in understanding and acting on this, balancing with workloads?**

**Cuevas-Trisán:** At their core, leaders want individuals and teams in their purview to provide their best effort in advancing organizational priorities. They want people who care for the mission, take pride in the quality and reliability of their work, and engage positively in collective efforts to advance their shared mission. For that to happen consistently and over time, employees need to feel respected and treated as full human beings, not just worker bees. Leaders who model inclusiveness and respect, and who also champion wellbeing, benefit from more engaged employees and a positive and more collegial work environment.

Whether we work in the lab or the classroom, provide essential services or work in one of the various facets of administration, we are expected to deliver our best work, and we embrace that expectation. As an institution, however, we have to account for the fact that we cannot always compartmentalize the different dimensions of our lives. We have families to provide and care for, financial responsibilities, health needs, and other factors that affect our focus, our energy, and our levels of engagement. Even positive events, like a relocation ---such as the one I recently experienced--- can be physically and emotionally tolling.

When we feel welcome, respected, and supported, we can contribute to the full extent of our capability. Harvard’s investments in wellbeing set us apart as an employer. Our heritage as an institution of higher learning is one of leadership, and we should aspire at leadership in our talent practices. Wellbeing is one of the key elements of our talent strategy because when our people thrive, our community thrives.