

Purpose, Resilience
& Connection:
Creating a
psychologically
healthy workplace



Eton Bridge Partners Mental Wellbeing Event Summary

It's been five years since Eton Bridge Partners hosted its first external mental wellbeing discussion and we are proud to have played a part in driving the conversation forward. Year on year this event brings evolving and more diverse perspectives on this subject to our network within the HR community and beyond. At Eton Bridge we have also been passionately working hard to build an internal culture where our people can thrive and be themselves.

Eton Bridge Partners were delighted to be able to hold their 5th Annual Mental Wellbeing Event in person, where we discussed the role of leadership in mental wellbeing and its relationship with organisational performance in October at The RSA in London.

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About our panellists



Karen Jackson

Managing Director and Lawyer at Didlaw specialising in disability discrimination and mental health issues in the workplace.

"The primary role of the leader is to bring about a change in culture."



Nathan Clements

Chief People Officer at SSP Group PLC, passionate driver of change and cultural transformation.

"My role is to be the voice of the colleagues and our customers, and if there has ever been a role for leadership then it's now."



Lauren Chiren

Founder of Women of a Certain Stage, specialises in helping employers and employees navigate menopause and women's health in work.

"We have to understand how we can create an environment and culture where women can flourish in the workplace."



Jen Smith

Head of Inclusion at the British Film Institute - voted one of the top 30 Most Influential Leaders in Diversity and Inclusion in 2020, and for this was awarded a special mention at BAFTA for her outstanding contribution.

"Do less things but do them really well and do them over a sustained period of time. That's when you really start to see the impact of your endeavours."



Tom Cross

Chartered Performance Psychologist bringing a wealth of experience from sport through to private equity, and is a big voice in the link between performance and mental health.

"John Kabat Zinn said, 'you can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf'. But some people fall off, and some people can't learn to surf - so how do we support them in all these situations?"



Jay Muthu

Director of Organisation and People Capability at Entain group, has worked with various sizes of organisation at various stages of maturity, including Monster and Reuters.

"Changing culture takes longer than buying computers - it requires fortitude and determination."

Remote and hybrid working models

The pandemic forced a large proportion of workers to quickly adjust to a new way of working - this was a key part of the debate.

Whilst many companies have embraced remote working and found other ways for workers to continue to be connected, even while working from home, it has also forced a blurring of lines between work and home life.

Is there a 'new normal'?

"People have now come to realise that there isn't a 'normal' way of working. Remote working or hybrid working is the 'new normal' for so many people that many won't want to go back to the way they were before the pandemic."

Jay pointed out that some leaders are still seeing the change to remote working as temporary. "Organisations think that all that will change is that people will work from home and one day we'll flip the switch and everything will be back to normal. But we can see that's not happening."

Tom noted that not everyone wants to work from home. "A comment from a CEO the other day was 'I've had six conversations today that I wouldn't have had if I wasn't in the office, and I want to get everyone back in the office'. So, while the world of work has changed, some people at the top want it to go back to the way things were."



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By population size, the vast majority of the workforce have continued to *go to work* throughout the entire pandemic.

Nathan Clements

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The genie is out of the bottle and it's not going back in.

Karen Jackson



There's no one way of working

Nathan pointed out that there isn't one way of working, and there never has been.

Many people struggle with working from home due to financial constraints, or not having the facilities at home to be able to continue to work from home. But he also said we need to move the conversation beyond the remote working argument. "By population size, the vast majority of the workforce have continued to go to work throughout the entire pandemic," he said.

So rather than focusing on where people work, it is key to look at how to support the diverse population of workers who might be struggling with financial, mental, and physical challenges.

Leadership - any kind of change is driven by the top

Karen said that in creating Didlaw, she wanted to be the antithesis of the kind of firm she had worked for in the past.

Law firms are often seen as unhealthy, high stress environments, and Karen realises that you don't need to increase internal stress and create a toxic work culture to succeed.

As a leader she is aware of her responsibility to signal to other people that they have to take care of themselves, that they should switch off, and not be working all hours. "It's up to them of course; but there's no expectation that they should be there, and to me that's the primary role of the leader, to signal these things, and to bring about a change in culture which we know is really difficult." Karen said.

Change starts from the top

Tom agreed that leaders need to consider themselves as role models because change starts from the top.

Seven-day working weeks and an overworking culture is not conducive to a 'psychologically informed environment.' Tom pointed out that in sport, an athlete is usually supported by someone who looks after their needs outside of sport and advises and guides them. "I wonder what else can we imagine in our systems and organisations that can support individuals' mental wellbeing?" he asked.

Actions speak a thousand words

It's not good enough to just say the right things, words need to be backed up by actions.

Jay pointed out that the diversity, equity and inclusion conversation has exploded in the last 18 months, with the Black Lives Matter movement, the forced solitude of lockdowns and the financial implications of these, and now the focus on mental health. But to make a difference requires consistency and fortitude.

"Are our leaders ready to make employees' work days very similar to their day off, where people are relaxed and performing at their best? Can they work with joy? This can't happen overnight." Jay suggested that a shift away from a focus on performance and towards engagement is crucial to support our workers.

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High performance doesn't always equate to high engagement. 60% of whitecollar workers are thinking of leaving their current employment because they're looking for a better culture match.

Jay Muthu



"High performance doesn't always equate to high engagement. 60% of white-collar workers are thinking of leaving their current employment because they're looking for a better culture match. As Karen pointed out later in the event, the new generation of workers have different expectations, they're not necessarily money driven; they want to work for someone and somewhere that is aligned with their values. "Some companies with outdated values are going to have a shock when they find out that no one wants to work for them anymore," she said.

The BFI's 3 Es - Environment, Empathetic Leadership and Expectation

Jen shared how the British Film Institute (BFI) have narrowed their leadership focus down to the three Es of Environment, Empathetic leadership and Expectation.

Leaders need to be aware that everyone's environments have changed. While working from home, many people were having their colleagues beamed into their living room, and their own living situation shared with their colleagues. This can be quite invasive. Leadership had to be conscious of the challenges of the invasion of privacy, and as leaders we need to temper our expectations.

Overworking has been glamourised (or simply inevitable due to a reduced workforce or increased workload) which is dangerous, and working from home hasn't helped that. "We're also very conscious about how easy it is to have digital presenteeism," Jen said. "There is a risk that people show up and say they're fine, then turn off their screen and then actually not be fine."

Empathetic leadership is dependent on relatable role models. Leaders who set the right tone by giving feedback with kindness and respect are crucial. The BFI now expects all feedback to be provided by phone call, or in person, rather than over email, to avoid the meaning becoming lost. "Particularly over email people can see a different meaning in what you're saying, how it lands with that person can have a really detrimental impact on their mental health."

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Leaders who set the right tone by giving feedback with *kindness* and *respect* are crucial.

Jen Smith



Bringing your 'whole self' to work

"I hate feeling that people have to come to work and slip into an alter ego." Karen Jackson

Lauren pointed out that there needs to be a shift in the way we communicate, so that we can really encourage people to be themselves at work.

"I think we have to stop asking people 'how are you?'" Lauren said. "Instead, we should ask deeper questions that are more specific about what is currently going on in people's lives. This might help them feel able to be honest and ask for help if they need it. "So, get creative and think of other ways that you can invite people to open up. Get curious about who they are and what they think."

Encouraging people to be their whole self, rather than having a 'work mode' and 'home mode' has been one of the key shifts as a result of the pandemic.

"Whatever is going on in your personal life will have an impact on your work, and I hate feeling that people have to come to work and slip into an alter ego," said Karen.

'How are you?' has become an automatic filler phrase to acknowledge people in a meaningless way and we don't really expect an answer from it.

Lauren suggested some alternatives such as:

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**What have you got going on just now?
And what support do you need with that?**

How can I support you today?

**How are you balancing your time
(e.g. between home, work, kids)?**

**Have you seen any good programmes
recently/read any good books?**

How are you taking care of yourself these days?

What's been going well for you?

Mental wellbeing starts with self-awareness

As a performance coach, Tom said that many people don't understand the impact that the pandemic, working from home, and all of these extra stresses have on themselves, because they don't have the space or the time to unpick it.

"High performance or any performance starts with self-awareness," he said. When people are more aware of their thought patterns and how their environment, and those around them affects them, they can put coping strategies in place to better deal with them.

"The coping strategy gives you self control, which gives you confidence, which leads to performance. But this all starts with self awareness. Mental wellbeing starts with self-awareness. When people really understand what they're feeling, and how what they're going through is impacting them, they have the potential to perform well."

Karen pointed out that it is a good leader's role to demonstrate some of those traits of self-awareness and self regulation. For example, leaders must give people permission to go home if they've done their work; this is one way of supporting their staff to have the space for self-awareness.

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Mental wellbeing starts with *self-awareness*. When people really understand what they're feeling, and how what they're going through is impacting them, they have the potential to *perform well*.

Tom Cross



Financial and social wellbeing

"We don't have the answer, but now is a time when we have the opportunity to think about it." Jay Muthu

Another aspect of considering the whole person is looking at the different areas of life that might have an impact on someone's mental health.

Financial constraints, due to furlough for instance, might mean that someone can't afford to heat their home. "We have to protect our lowest paid workers and be conscious of how this is impacting them." Jen said. There is a strong correlation between financial wellbeing and mental wellness that can be easily forgotten.

Social wellbeing is also a factor. There has been a big push towards kindness in all areas of life, but how can employers further support those who don't feel confident enough to speak up? We don't have the answer, but now is a time when we have the opportunity to think about it."

Nathan pointed out that purpose, resilience, and connection are intertwined. But it is connection and purpose that can be generated through practical steps in a work setting. "You can define a purpose, you can share it, you can communicate it for good or bad reasons. And we can create the opportunity for connection in work. Whether remote or hybrid, or events like this. But in terms of resilience, it's more an outcome of all the things you put into an organisation. It comes from self-awareness, confidence and connection."

How to support a psychologically healthy workplace

Top tips from our panel.



Create an environment where it's OK to ask for help.



Don't just focus on what you deliver, it's equally important to examine how you deliver it.



Don't tolerate high performing jerks! They create a toxic culture in the organisation from which you can never go back.



If you're not prepared to speak out, you instantly become part of the problem. Be accountable.



All leaders should learn how to listen and how to coach their team.

Key takeaways



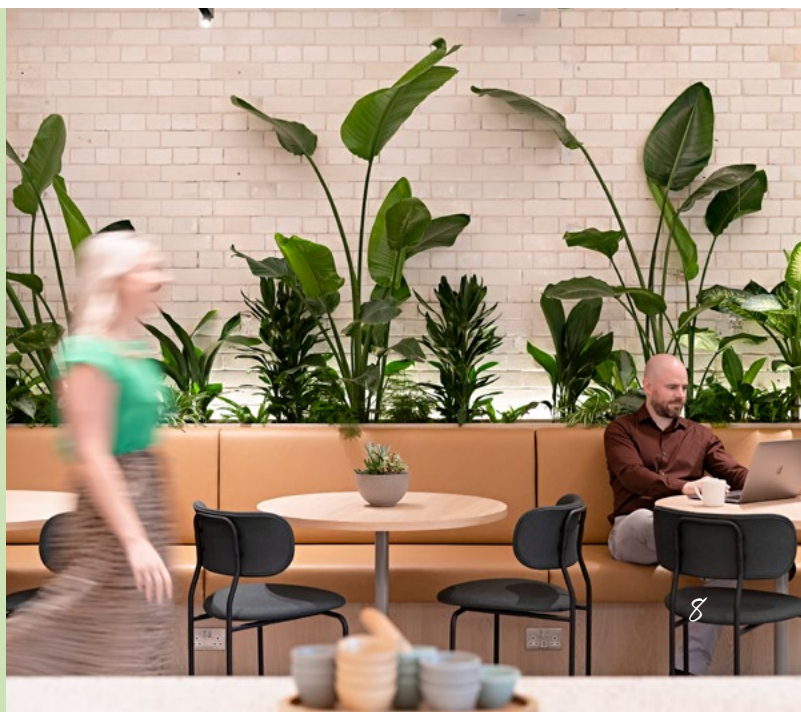
Always have important conversations. Giving feedback over the phone or in person rather than over email to avoid confusion and ensure the message has been well received and correctly understood.



Get creative about how you engage with people. Don't simply ask "how are you?" Instead ask, "what have you got on your plate right now?" This will help people feel more able to open up if they would like to.



Encourage self-awareness. Help people understand what is happening in their internal and external life so that they can help their mental wellbeing.



About our host Olivia Sharp

Partner, Executive Search, Human Resources

Olivia specialises in executive search for our HR Practice. Her practitioner background in HR, gained in various senior positions in a FTSE100 organisation, combined with her extensive general management experience, gives our HR practice a unique offering for clients and candidates alike.

A Chartered Member of the CIPD, Olivia has a specialist interest in mental health as well as discrimination and diversity in the workplace, and has been leading our internal and external events calendar for mental health education. She also brings first-hand experience of delivering business turnarounds as well as wide scale people and cultural change, including the opportunities and challenges presented by a complex industrial relations environment.



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Executive Search, Interim Management, and Consulting across the breadth of corporate leadership.

As trusted partners, we ensure our clients attract the best talent in the market to achieve their business goals, and our candidates develop their careers with leading international organisations. Our unrivalled functional expertise means we are superbly placed to deliver the best individuals across the breadth of corporate leadership, regardless of industry background.



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