How Serving in The Army Taught This Leader The Importance of Employee Wellbeing

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Once upon a time, protecting the wellbeing of employees might have been viewed as a luxury for a few lucky workers or a fluffy topic for soft leaders with nothing better to worry about — but things are changing. The U.S. military has recognized the importance of mental health since 2009 when it launched its "resilience training" program. While the corporate sector has been slower to catch on, more than 90% of leaders believe promoting wellness boosts performance.

As a past military leader myself, many of the biggest lessons I've learned about employee wellbeing come from my time in the army. Today, I'll share them with you.

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The military and mindfulness

The big M has become more popularized over the last few years, yet not every organization thinks it's useful or feels comfortable discussing it. Most people certainly wouldn't associate with the military.

But mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the moment. And where could that skill be more critical than in a

survival environment where failing to be alert could put you and the rest of the team in danger?

The army teaches soldiers how to stay in the moment and make better decisions under pressure by encouraging mindfulness practices like sitting with your thoughts for a few minutes each day. As well as boosting on-the-job performance, the military has found this training helps soldiers to deal with the after-effects of being in a traumatic situation.

Standard employees might not be dealing with life-and-death situations, but they can adopt similar principles.

Mindfulness in the workplace comes down to developing the ability to deal with the emotions, stresses and conflicts that crop up each day. You need to teach employees how to become more aware of the present moment and accept their feelings, thoughts and decision-making processes instead of being slaves to them. It's the difference between feeling stressed and thinking "the world is burning, I'm overwhelmed and I want to go home" and "I'm feeling the sensation of stress right now, but that's okay, it's just a sensation. I'll let myself breathe for a bit and let it go."

Thanks to the widespread awareness of mindfulness these days, it's easier than ever to help your team learn to deal with what's going on in their head. For instance, the Calm app is full of guided meditations, many of which are directly related to the workplace and last less than ten minutes (making them easy to slot into schedules).

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It’s all about the culture

You’d struggle to find an organization with a more tight-knit culture than the army – those who have been in the military often describe it as a “brotherhood.” Everyone is united by their shared purpose to serve the country, authority is respected for the most part and everyone knows they have to work together to achieve their goals.

68% of veterans say they’re proud of their service. How many people would say the same of a former employer?

You can try to emulate this idea of a “brotherhood” by giving your employees a sense of purpose and connecting them to the company’s greater mission. Make your values a part of daily processes, and review them with your employees.

The way you lead also makes a big difference. Instead of creating a dog-eat-dog or hustle-hard environment, lead with empathy, transparency and trustworthiness. Are you truly being honest with your team and doing your best to look out for them?

To show that you have everyone’s best interests at heart, curate an agile working environment and give everyone opportunities to try new things, plus the flexibility to take things easy when they’re struggling. You may be able to use technology to help your team connect and get more out of their job – for instance, tools that facilitate remote working or offer education.

Don’t forget the financial side

It’s a well-known fact that the U.S. military looks after its soldiers. Not only do most soldiers receive a fairly substantial salary, but they also have a range of other perks. These include:

- Free college at public colleges.
- A savings deposit program with 10% interest (for those in a combat zone).
- Affordable housing.
- Affordable life insurance.
- Allowances for food and housing (in some cases).

Many private-sector companies could learn from this. In the working world, employers often favor solutions related to improving corporate culture and providing perks of the job, while employees would simply prefer to earn more. The truth is something in between – there's more to a positive working experience than good pay, but without financial security, you're probably not going to get people to stick around or produce their best work.

Who is going to want to follow the guided meditations on Calm if they can't even fill their car up with gas?

Considering the current environment with rising inflation, high-interest rates and the increasing cost of living, this isn't something you should be neglecting. Do some market research to gauge how much other companies are giving employees with similar roles – and look at your budget to see if there's any wiggle room to offer more.

Wellbeing is just the beginning

With the global corporate wellness market set to reach $90 billion by 2026, overlooking this could mean you get left behind. When you work on your team's wellbeing, you won't just be making your employees happier – you'll increase the chances of them sticking around, being more productive and being committed enough to the organization to lead innovation.

Employee wellbeing isn't as simple as implementing a single action, and a strategy that works for one company isn't necessarily going to be right for every organization. But if

you try various approaches and are prepared to tweak them until you figure out what works, you'll be impressed with the results.

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