A Review of "Wellbeing at Work: How to Build Resilient and Thriving Teams"

Jim Clifton and Jim Harter, New York: Gallup Press (2021)

Review By: Jacqueline Hooper

How are you doing, right now? Are you net thriving, net struggling, or net suffering? What is a net thriving life, anyway? Can individuals, work teams, and organizations achieve a net thriving life during times of business uncertainty and a global pandemic? Gallup's CEO, Jim Clifton, and Gallup's Chief Scientist, Jim Harter, say it's more than possible. Some organizations in the United States and in other parts of the world are thriving today, amidst a myriad of challenges that have left other organizations suffering or out of business entirely. *Wellbeing at Work: How to Build Resilient and Thriving Teams* is an updated version of Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements (2010), the latter written by Tom Rath and Jim Harter. *Wellbeing at Work* is part business case/data summary and part toolkit that is replete with practical ways to assess, intervene, and enhance wellbeing.

As someone whose career has included roles in wellness, leadership development, healthcare, and peak performance settings, I agreed with the majority of what I read in this book. Three key takeaways, though, that most captured my attention were the following conclusions from Clifton and Harter:

The first takeaway, is that a hybrid work environment that includes regular feedback – more than once a week – is correlated with higher wellbeing than experienced in other work arrangements (i.e., completely in-person or completely remote work). Trust in one's manager and a desired level of autonomy in accomplishing work fosters wellbeing, engagement, and productivity.

A second takeaway was that *interesting work* is the differentiator between burnout and flow – the latter term coined by the late Dr. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi as *optimal experiencing* (2008). *Wellbeing at Work* cites research data from interviews with "oldsters" who lived to be 95 years of age or older and reported high satisfaction with their lives, overall. Common denominators were that these individuals worked a median average of 60 hours a week, had a median retirement age of 80 for men and 70 for women, with 93% of men and 85% of women reporting

they got a "great deal of satisfaction" from work. Not insignificantly, a majority of these "oldsters" also reported a "great deal of fun" at work. Of note, these individuals were interviewed during the late 1950s, when processed foods, automation of tasks, and opportunities to work exclusively indoors (i.e., knowledge worker positions) were far less abundant as compared to today.

A final takeaway was that overall wellbeing is the most influenced by the Career Wellbeing element. While all five elements (Career, Social, Financial, Physical, and Community Wellbeing) matter, Career Wellbeing is the catalyst component, from which positive or negative influences to all other wellbeing elements cascade.

At the United States Air Force Academy, we teach the Leader of Character framework, support others in implementing this framework, and aspire to live the Leader of Character framework in our day-to-day lives. Much of *Wellbeing at Work* aligns with the "Lift Others" pillar, one of three pillars in the framework and is directed at what managers—not, per se, executive leadership—can do to enhance wellbeing and *lift* those they lead. Enhanced wellbeing, in turn, positively influences engagement, productivity, and performance. The impact a manager has on an individual and a team is pervasive and palpable. *Wellbeing at Work* cites research conducted with German and American workers, which found that people with a bad manager had even worse wellbeing than those who are currently in need of or are seeking employment (De Neve, Krekel, & Ward, 2018). To reiterate, overall wellbeing is greatly influenced by career wellbeing and engagement at work—the latter term referring to evidence of collaboration, opportunities for personal growth, support, and caring in the work place. While the percentage of American employees who are engaged at work rose slightly to 36% in 2021 (Harter, 2021), that still leaves the majority of employees as not engaged, and who are actively looking for other employment or open to other employment opportunities. For engaged employees, however, it takes at least a 20% raise from a potential employer to make them consider leaving their current employer. Money, it turns out, is insufficient to sustain long-term engagement.

What are some simple, but often overlooked, practices managers can implement to improve wellbeing? In addition to acknowledging the significant challenges to our mental and emotional health this "new normal" of work has brought, managers can model and encourage wellbeing practices. Examples of this can include the following practices:

- getting up and taking breaks,
- spending time outdoors when possible,
- taking advantage of policies that allow employees to engage in physical training (PT) Physical Training while still on duty,
- celebrating wellbeing milestones and other accomplishments,
- including employee-selected goals when having development conversations with employees – not only at review time, and
- acknowledging the unique and inherent strengths that each employee has. Regarding this final point, also allow employees to use their strengths in accomplishing their job duties.

Wellbeing at Work makes all of the above not just do-able, but fairly easy. The book comes with a one-time use link to the Clifton Strengths Assessment (which yields a rank ordering of a person's 34 unique strengths); the 12 items (Q12) that Gallup concludes can measure one's overall satisfaction and current engagement levels at work: and, a Manager Resource Guide mapped to the Five Elements of Wellbeing. Oh – and if you want to know if you are currently net thriving, net

struggling, or net suffering, you can take a simple Gallup Net Thriving survey, find out what step on the Cantril Life Evaluation ladder you placed yourself, and identify practices that you want to commit to in order to improve your wellbeing, resilience, and performance.

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References

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