

Chapter 25

Creating Sustained Change: Avoiding Derailment During the Last Stage of a Wellbeing Intervention

Allison M. Ellis and Autumn D. Krauss

Abstract In this chapter, we discuss the following three primary causes for wellbeing interventions failing to achieve long-term sustainability: lack of ongoing organizational support, badly organized intervention implementation, and lack of reinforcement from frontline supervisors. When senior leaders do not provide ongoing support for the intervention, the organizational climate does not reinforce the changes in attitudes and behaviors needed to embed the intervention. Additionally, an unorganized intervention implementation leads to some employees participating in the intervention while others have not, hindering the likelihood of a strong positive culture for change following the intervention. Finally, when frontline leaders do not continually recognize and reinforce wellbeing attitudes and behaviors targeted by the intervention, employees quickly lose traction for change. Given the consequence of these issues (the intervention outcomes are not sufficiently maintained over time), we suggest a more strategic implementation plan with specific embedding strategies as one solution for the long-term sustainability challenge. This type of implementation plan takes a more deliberate approach to introducing the intervention so that embedding strategies can be considered prior to intervention implementation. Embedding strategies might include identifying organizational champions to help foster the change over time, establishing associated reward and recognition programs to be used by frontline leaders, and creating opportunities for ongoing reinforcement of the intervention in team meetings and other forums. Finally, we recommend that the intervention be aligned with past programs and future initiatives to help employees fully commit to it and not see it as an isolated organizational project.

Keywords Wellbeing intervention • Intervention derailment • Sustainable change

A.M. Ellis (✉) • A.D. Krauss
Research Team, Sentis, Englewood, CO, USA
e-mail: Ame2@pdx.edu; research.team@sentis.net

Winston Churchill once said, “*However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.*” Indeed, wellbeing interventions that fail to produce meaningful results in terms of long-term, sustainable health and wellbeing improvements for employees and their organizations are of little value no matter how “beautiful” the intervention strategy. So while meta-analytic results suggest that organizational interventions aimed at protecting and improving employee health and wellbeing can have meaningful effects (Richardson and Rothstein 2008), these positive changes can quickly fade, with employee attitudes and behavior reverting back to pre-intervention levels (e.g., Page and Vella-Brodrick 2013).

Organizational scholars and practitioners have long struggled with how to keep interventions on track and create sustainable change. Indeed, the ability to facilitate long-term changes in the health and wellbeing of employees is critical from multiple perspectives—from an academic standpoint when examining the efficacy of our theories, from a practical point of view with respect to fostering a positive and healthy work context for employees, and finally from a commercial standpoint given the substantial financial investment made by organizations when implementing a wellbeing intervention. This chapter aims to address this challenge, by first reflecting on our own experiences when wellbeing interventions have failed to result in sustained change, and then offering recommendations and strategies for how to effectively overcome this potential point of intervention derailment.

Specifically, we discuss the following three ways that wellbeing interventions can derail by failing to create lasting change: when the organizational climate does not support and facilitate the change; when the implementation of the intervention is disorganized or inconsistent; and when the intervention does not have adequate support from employees’ direct supervisors. Consistent with a growing focus on systems-based approaches to wellbeing interventions (Lamontagne et al. 2007), these factors highlight the need to consider all organizational levels and be strategic at each phase during an intervention project (i.e., preparation, implementation, and maintenance) in order to facilitate lasting change.

25.1 Three Reasons Why Wellbeing Interventions Can Fail to Achieve Long-Term Sustainability

25.1.1 Failure to Fully Account for the Organizational Context During Intervention Preparation

Organizational climate has been widely acknowledged as having substantial direct effects on employee attitudes and behavior (Neal et al. 2000) as well as indirect effects by either facilitating or hindering an organizational intervention (Martin et al. 2005). Simply put, the organizational context in which the intervention occurs influences the likelihood that the intervention will be successful, particularly in the long-term. Specifically, an organization’s climate determines how much the workplace’s

social context supports the changes targeted by the intervention. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the climate of an organization can provide insight into the maturity of the organization as it relates to the focus of the intervention, in this case wellbeing, and ultimately the extent to which the organization and its employees are ready for change.

Prior to any intervention, organizations are functioning at a certain level of maturity when it comes to their wellbeing practices, social norms about wellbeing, and employees' wellbeing attitudes and behavior. How sophisticated and ambitious the wellbeing intervention is should be informed by the organization's current wellbeing maturity (Prochaska and Velicer 1997), because this maturity level will dictate the extent to which wellbeing intervention objectives will be aligned with current human resource practices and supported by the broader organization—both of which are critical to the long-term sustainability of wellbeing interventions (Nytrø et al. 2000). Moreover, at the individual level, employees' perceptions of their organization's wellbeing climate should influence how they respond to any wellbeing change initiative (Martin et al. 2005).

It has been our experience that the most sustainable wellbeing interventions are those in which the intervention objectives reflect significant wellbeing improvements, while still taking into account the organization's current wellbeing standard and the extent to which its cultural factors (leadership, practices, environment, employee beliefs and attitudes) will be helpful or hindering to the change process. For example, an organization low in wellbeing maturity, and very early in the stages of change, cannot be expected to sustain an intervention that presumes a high appreciation for the importance of wellbeing or a high level of preparedness for change, even if the intervention is initially embraced. Similarly, wellbeing interventions that target individual attitudes and behavior (e.g., a stress management intervention), if not appropriately coupled with an acknowledgement of or attempt to reduce causal factors at the organization level (e.g., reduction of stress through job redesign or management training), will likely have low probability of sustained impact over time (Nytrø et al. 2000).

In one instance, we partnered with an organization that recognized a wellbeing intervention was needed, given increased employee reports of mental health and wellbeing issues. While the organizational stakeholders initially wanted to focus on employee wellbeing attitudes and behavior (e.g., use of the company's EAP), they agreed to expand the focus of the intervention to leaders' skills in supporting their employees through the wellbeing improvement process. Even so, they were still resistant to any recommendations to alter their practices or environmental conditions despite the observation that these things were clearly contributing to the wellbeing challenges their employees were facing. Without targeting this organizational context, it was likely the intervention would have limited long-term impact on employee wellbeing. Thus, taking into account the full organizational context that is influencing employee wellbeing increases the likelihood that the intervention will introduce changes that are palatable, comprehensive, and ultimately sustainable.

25.1.2 Badly Organized Intervention Implementation

A second factor that derails the long-term sustainability of a wellbeing intervention is an unorganized intervention implementation. Although there is a relative dearth of process evaluation studies published in the occupational health literature (Nielsen et al. 2006), it stands to reason that contextual factors during the intervention, even basic decisions about how the intervention is implemented, influence the extent to which the intervention is impactful and this impact is maintained over time.

Indeed, our own experiences have taught us that even when an intervention implementation plan is purposely built to facilitate sustained impact, unexpected consequences counter to this intention can still occur. For example, we partnered with an organization to implement an intervention aimed at increasing employees' safety communication within their teams. The intervention implementation plan was strategically designed so that select employees within each team would participate in the intervention first. The rationale was that the initial participants would share their experiences with their teammates and facilitate some embedding of the intervention concepts within their teams before all employees had even participated. Unfortunately, participants got the impression that they were not allowed to discuss the content of the intervention or share their experiences with co-workers for fear of 'ruining the surprise.' This resulted in suspicion about the content and intention of the intervention from those yet to participate; but more importantly, early intervention participants failed to apply and ultimately sustain the behavioral changes targeted by the intervention. Had we not collected intervention process data throughout the engagement, we may have failed to identify this issue or missed the opportunity to take steps to proactively address it.

This example illustrates the need to not only strategically plan the intervention implementation in a way that promotes sustained impact but also collect intervention process data along the way to ensure that the intervention is playing out as intended (Nielsen et al. 2006). Overall, keeping the implementation of the wellbeing intervention on track is a necessary precondition to the intervention ultimately having sustained impact.

25.1.3 Lack of Supervisor Support During Intervention Maintenance

Reinforcement from frontline supervisors is perhaps one of the most important predictors of whether an intervention's effects are sustained over time. Indeed, research evidence demonstrates the integral role that frontline supervisors play in facilitating the transfer of learnings acquired during an intervention back to the workplace (Zohar 2002). Moreover, supervisors have been referred to as the 'linking pin' in organizations, because they function as both the organizational representative and informal enforcer of organizational policies (Hammer et al. 2013). In the

context of a wellbeing intervention, this means that employees are likely to look to their direct leaders for clues about how seriously they should take an intervention, what kinds of opportunities they will have to implement changes promoted during the intervention, and how much support for wellbeing issues they can expect to receive from the organization.

Illustrating this point, Page and Vella-Brodrick (2013) reported positive effects on employee wellbeing immediately following their intervention and 3 months post-intervention, but the effects had faded at 6 months post-intervention. The authors cited a lack of on-the-job support for the wellbeing changes as a primary reason for the intervention's derailment. They argued that counteractive effects, in the form of participant frustration or disappointment, can occur when there is limited opportunity to apply new skills on-the-job (Page and Vella-Brodrick 2013). In large part, employees' direct leaders are responsible for creating or at least pointing out these opportunities.

There are numerous reasons why leaders may not be supportive of a wellbeing intervention including past experiences of intervention failures, defensiveness and associated perceptions that they are being blamed for their employees' poor wellbeing, lack of agreement about the need for the intervention, or conflicting messages from upper management about the same (e.g., "the intervention has to happen but do not let it get in the way of operations"). Thus, our focus with regard to wellbeing interventions has always been to intervene with the leaders first. This means not only securing commitment from those directly in contact with frontline employees but also giving them the knowledge and skills to provide employees with opportunities for continued improvement after the intervention has occurred (Dewe and O'Driscoll 2002) and implement new practices aligned with the intervention's focus (e.g., wellbeing check-ins with employees). Then, when the workforce experiences the intervention, their opportunities and motivation to change are greatly increased as well as their understanding of the importance of the intervention for them and the broader business. In this way, leaders 'make the call' on how effective the intervention is going to be and whether it is going to result in long-term impact.

25.2 Taking Proactive Steps to Ensure Wellbeing Intervention Sustainability

Wellbeing interventions do not have to lose steam over time. In fact, there are a number of actions that can be taken to ensure that a wellbeing intervention is able to affect long-lasting change within an organization. In consideration of the above discussion and drawing on our experiences conducting wellbeing interventions, we offer the following recommendations:

First, the intervention preparation stage is critical for diagnosing the wellbeing maturity of an organization and gaining insight into the organizational context (e.g., wellbeing climate) in which the intervention will occur. Aligning the

intervention with the organization's current level of wellbeing maturity and change readiness increases the likelihood that the intervention will be met with optimism and acceptance. When strategically planned, the intervention will gradually push an organization forward toward a more advanced and mature wellbeing standard, fostering the maintenance of these improvements over time.

Second, identify strategies during the implementation phase that can be used to facilitate the long-term sustainability of the wellbeing intervention. This includes who will be included in the intervention and how the intervention will be implemented across these individuals. For example, identifying those individuals who are most supportive of as well as most resistant to the intervention and having these individuals first participate in the intervention can serve to break down potential barriers to intervention maintenance and also create a groundswell of informal support for the intervention before it is implemented with everyone. Furthermore, the collection of process evaluation data during the intervention can offer valuable insight into potential challenges to intervention maintenance, allowing for consideration and correction of these before they derail the long-term success of the intervention.

When taking into account the central role of leaders in influencing employee wellbeing (Quick et al. 2014) it becomes clear that leaders need to take an active and empowered role in any wellbeing intervention. For instance, having leaders participate first in the intervention creates an opportunity to address leaders' concerns and secure their commitment to the intervention prior to its full implementation. Further, encouraging leaders to provide opportunities to their teams for ongoing discussion and reflection post-intervention is one way to foster a social context supportive of changes resulting from the intervention. At the same time, it is important to point out that the wellbeing intervention should not be tied too tightly to a single leader. Empowering all leaders to take ownership of and responsibility for the intervention prevents against the intervention faltering if a leader that is a key proponent leaves the organization.

Finally, the wellbeing intervention should be at the very least aligned with, if not integrated into, current and future organizational initiatives. The most successful wellbeing interventions are those that are considered by organizational members as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time event disparate from the day-to-day operations of the company. Painting a clear picture for employees of how the wellbeing intervention fits within the broader human resources and operational contexts is an important step toward motivating employees to maintain the wellbeing changes that they make.

25.3 Conclusion

Through experiences conducting interventions targeting the protection of employee safety and promotion of employee wellbeing, we have had the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. So much of what determines whether a wellbeing

intervention achieves its objectives in the long-term actually occurs during the preparation and implementation stages of the intervention. Each decision – what is the scope of the intervention, how will the intervention be implemented – must be made with an eye towards setting the intervention up for long-term success. With this in mind, it is paramount that an embedding strategy is identified prior to the wellbeing intervention even being launched. By taking into account the factors outlined above as part of this embedding plan, chances are improved that the wellbeing intervention will have sustained impact.

Key Messages

- Align the intervention objectives with the wellbeing maturity of the organization. In order for a wellbeing intervention to create lasting change, it is important that the changes are realistic and will be supported by the organizational context. By fully understanding this context, insight can be gained into what types of changes are sustainable and will be supported on a long-term basis by the organization.
- Use a consistent and organized intervention implementation strategy. Thoughtful planning and purposeful execution of a wellbeing intervention are crucial components for the intervention to initiate lasting change. Collecting participants' perceptions of potential barriers to intervention maintenance during the preparation and implementation stages will allow for these to be proactively addressed in advance of them hindering the sustainability of the intervention.
- Target frontline leader support as part of the wellbeing intervention strategy. Direct leader support is a critical determinant of the long-term viability of wellbeing interventions, as they signal to frontline employees the importance of the intervention, reinforce improved wellbeing attitudes and behavior demonstrated by employees, and facilitate ongoing reflection and communication about wellbeing issues. For a wellbeing intervention to have any chance at long-term impact, frontline leaders need to be fully committed to and supportive of it.

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Maria Karanika-Murray • Caroline Biron
Editors

Derailed Organizational Interventions for Stress and Well-Being

Confessions of Failure
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Editors

Maria Karanika-Murray
Division of Psychology, School
of Social Sciences
Nottingham Trent University
Nottingham, UK

Caroline Biron
Faculty of Business Administration,
Department of Management
Laval University
Québec, QC, Canada

ISBN 978-94-017-9866-2

ISBN 978-94-017-9867-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-9867-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015944816

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London

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