

Content Submission Document

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A staff-centric approach and “summer bucks”: Shaping employee well-being at a professional counseling organization

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Recently, I was asked if the idea of employee well-being takes on additional meaning when you work at an organization dedicated to supporting mental health care professionals. After thinking about it for a moment, my answer was “Yes, because of what you prioritize.”

I’ve worked in human resources at the American Counseling Association (ACA) for almost four years now. And I can say without hesitation that the employee-centric culture here is what drew me in and drives my passion and work as chief of staff today. In one sense, yes, the nature of the counseling profession has certainly shaped our organization with its focus on individual health and well-being. But more important, I believe that what we’re cultivating here in terms of employee well-being and engagement is helping to drive and shape the future of counseling.

Prioritizing people over productivity

Today, more companies are finally realizing that genuinely caring about staff has inherent value. Fostering employee well-being and engagement is about solving problems and reducing stress. But you can’t tackle those things superficially or assume that what one person needs is the same for everyone else.

While some employees might be preoccupied with questions like, *What’s going on with my kids? Is my babysitter sick? or How am I getting to work today?*, others might be worrying about things like, *Is there a career path here for me? or Is this job preparing me for what comes next?*

Every person is unique with their own experiences and needs. You need to care about helping people answer the questions and solve the problems that matter to them, just like a counselor might with a client. One of the



things that I love about my current role is taking the time to find out what all those different questions and preoccupations are for our staff and exploring solutions.

That can look like anything from designing a new hybrid office space and remote work plan informed by staff surveys to providing professional development opportunities that aren't so much about an employee's role here, but where they might be headed in the future. It can't just be about us as an organization, it has to also be about them.

Leadership driven by employee well-being

Before coming to ACA, I usually found myself battling it out with company presidents when it came to staff needs and well-being. Now, I find myself joking with our CEO Rich Yep and saying to him, "Seriously, we don't need any more leave!"

Similar to the idea of the individual client driving counseling work, everything with Rich is employees first. He's always proactively thinking about what else we can do for our staff. Giving everyone plenty of time off is important. But for him, being thoughtful about how and why matters, too. For example, he created our "Summer Bucks" paid leave which gives every employee an extra three days of paid leave to use between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

When I asked him why he was putting restrictions on it instead of just letting people use it whenever they wanted, he said, "Because I want people to actually use it when it matters. I want them to take that extra time for themselves and their families to enjoy the summer because that directly impacts mental health and well-being."

Simple ways to support staff and foster engagement

Providing practical resources that meet employees where they are is also critical. Especially after the initial COVID-19 outbreak and the murder of George Floyd, we started thinking about and listening to what individual people—staff, counselors, community members—need right now.

From taking a closer look at our employee assistance program providers to better identify when a staff member might be struggling and just giving staff paid mental health days to helping counselors find practical information that spoke directly to parents dealing with children in crisis, we focused on what was actually needed rather than what most companies and organizations traditionally do.

It seems a rare thing to find myself at this stage of my career and being able to say, "I genuinely care about each individual person here, and look at all of these things I've been able to put in place to cultivate their mental health and well-being." But here I am.

