

Barriers to a thriving workplace culture



You can build a well-thought-out strategy, invest in culture and wellbeing initiatives, and roll out key programmes - yet still struggle to see a real, measurable impact. It can feel frustrating and demotivating. So what stops people, culture, and wellbeing strategies from driving real business change?

1. Leadership

Leaders shape your culture. You can have the most forward-thinking policies and initiatives, but if leaders aren't modelling the right behaviours, your people's day-to-day experience may not align with your organisation's values.

2. Ways of working

Workload, poor collaboration, and workplace conflict have a huge impact on engagement, productivity, and wellbeing. If people are constantly overwhelmed, stuck in meetings, and dealing with inefficient processes, it undermines even the best initiatives and intentions.

3. Focusing on symptoms over root causes

Too often, organisations invest in initiatives that alleviate the symptoms of poor culture and wellbeing (e.g. stress management apps and resilience workshops) rather than addressing the root causes such as high workloads, ineffective leadership, and poor communication.

The more you target these underlying issues, the greater the impact on performance, retention, and overall business success.

Beyond initiatives and benefits:
Building a thriving workplace culture

Healthy leadership

A thriving workplace starts at the top. Leaders play a critical role in shaping culture, and when they are engaged, informed, and aligned with the organisation's goals, they can drive sustainable change.

Developing leadership capability is essential to making culture and wellbeing strategies actually work.

The best leaders:



Role model healthy behaviours

Visibly taking breaks, avoiding late-night emails, setting boundaries, and fostering balance.



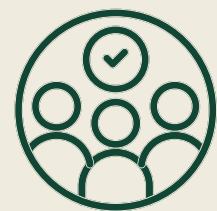
Streamline ways of working

Great leaders actively remove inefficiencies and unnecessary demands, reducing burnout and driving productivity.



Show vulnerability

Leaders who share challenges and seek support create a culture of trust and psychological safety.



Foster psychological safety and inclusion

When employees feel safe to speak up, innovate, and admit mistakes, performance and engagement soars.

Fostering psychological safety



Google's Project Aristotle:

Google's Project Aristotle studied 180 teams over two years and found that psychological safety was the single most important factor in high-performing teams. Psychological safety means employees feel comfortable being themselves, sharing ideas, and admitting mistakes without fear of punishment or embarrassment.

What is psychological safety?

"A climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. They feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of retribution or embarrassment."

- Amy Edmonson, *The Fearless Organisation*

How leaders can foster psychological safety:

- Set clear communications & expectations
- Role model vulnerability
- Show appreciation
- Be consistent and reliable
- Get to know your team
- Encourage diverse perspectives



Ways of working

Too often, people strategies focus on engagement surveys, perks, or standalone initiatives without tackling how the work actually gets done.

When organisations **optimise ways of working**, they reduce stress, increase efficiency, and create an environment where people can do their best work.

Key questions to consider:

- Are you all your processes as efficient as they could be?
- Does everyone have the right tech to do their jobs properly?
- Are your systems helping or hindering productivity?
- Are people constantly struggling with their workload?
- Are people stuck in back-to-back meetings with no time for deep focus?

- Are employees truly able to disconnect outside of work hours?
- What are key themes from engagement surveys that indicate stress points?
- Do employees feel empowered to say no or set boundaries?
- Do you have a fake urgency culture? Do people feel they need to reply and action everything immediately?
- Are workloads sustainable?

Overhauling meeting culture



Many organisations are drowning in meetings, leaving employees with little time for strategic thinking or execution. Poor meeting culture can drive burnout, inefficiency, and frustration.

Optimising meetings

Clear purpose

Does the meeting drive action?
If not, cancel it.

Duration

Do meetings need to be a full hour?
Could they be 25 minutes or 45 minutes instead?

Recurring meetings

Do they need to happen as often as they do?
Could they be replaced with asynchronous updates?

Alternatives

Could an email, voice note, or shared document work instead?

Attendees

Does everyone need to be there?
Could one person attend and cascade key takeaways?



Solving the root causes, not just the symptoms

Many organisations invest in initiatives that aim to alleviate symptoms of poor culture and wellbeing rather than addressing the root causes. While resources like mindfulness apps and resilience training have value, they won't solve high workloads, poor leadership, or lack of psychological safety.

A smarter approach:

- 💡 Identify the potential causes.
- 💡 Address at an organisational Level.
- 💡 Offer support on an individual level.
- 💡 Reduce the need for constant 'fixes'.

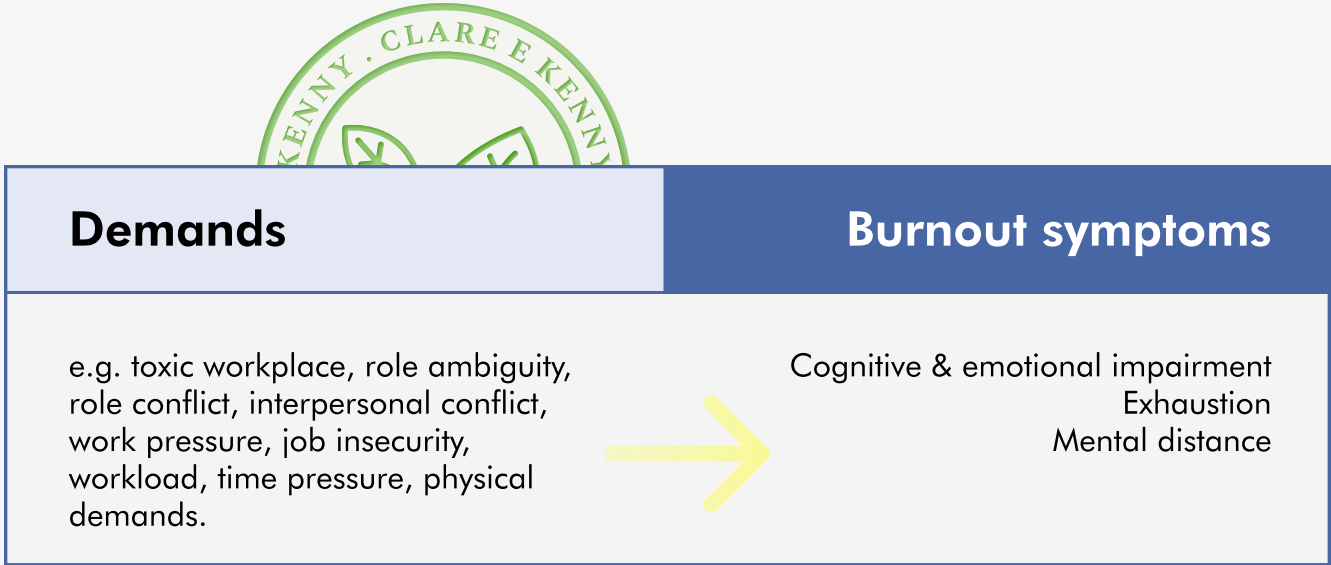
For example:

Symptoms		
Stress / Anxiety / Overwhelm		
Common alleviations		
Mindfulness app / Resilience webinar		
POTENTIAL CAUSES	At work	At home
	e.g Workload or problems with work/ life balance, lack of time to focus, poor management, lack of clarity or support.	e.g Parenting challenges, financial issues, or poor health.
If you tackle the root causes, you won't need to continuously invest in short-term solutions.		
ADDRESS & SUPPORT	At an organisational level	At a personal level
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Analyse engagement data, workload trends, and leadership behaviours.Invest in leadership development, streamline inefficient processes, and challenge harmful work norms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Offer tailored solutions like coaching, financial support, and flexible work options.Provide a company wide EAP.Accessible nutritional or financial education resources.

Burnout: a risk for your best people

Burnout disproportionately impacts high-performing, highly engaged employees. Research from the McKinsey Health Institute found that holistic wellbeing (physical, mental, social, and spiritual health) and burnout risk are influenced by different factors.

Organisations that ignore workplace demands (e.g., excessive workload, role conflict, poor management) may see high engagement scores while still failing to prevent burnout.



Reference: McKinsey Health Institute

Using storytelling to drive meaningful culture change

Stigma and shame create barriers to inclusion, wellbeing, and psychological safety at work. Whether it's mental health, neurodiversity, or addiction, many employees fear judgement.

When leaders embrace vulnerability and share their own stories, they humanise these challenges and foster a culture of openness. By normalising struggles, they send a powerful message: it's okay to be human. **Storytelling is a catalyst** for breaking down barriers, building empathy, and creating understanding.

Embedding storytelling in the workplace



Incorporate storytelling into everyday leadership. Leaders don't have to share their deepest, darkest stories, but acknowledging when things are tough or admitting mistakes fosters compassion and psychological safety.



Feature real stories in company initiatives and campaigns. Sharing lived experiences helps highlight important issues and creates a powerful ripple effect across the organisation.



Encourage peer-to-peer storytelling through support networks. Connecting people with shared experiences and challenges builds strong, meaningful support systems within your organisation.



Use podcasts or videos to highlight lived experiences. These formats are a brilliant way to raise awareness and show your commitment to supporting all human experiences. They also strengthen your external employer brand, helping you attract top talent.

Storytelling brings abstract issues to life, making them real and relatable. It shifts perspectives, breaks stigma, and fosters inclusion. When leaders embrace storytelling, they create cultures where people feel safe, valued, and truly understood.

Key takeaways



Leaders shape culture - investing in their development is crucial.



Workload and ways of working are major drivers of engagement and wellbeing. Don't just ignore these factors and hope for the best!



Addressing root causes of poor wellbeing is far more effective than alleviating symptoms.



Burnout prevention requires reducing demands, not just adding wellbeing perks.

Let's create workplaces where people thrive, not just survive.

About the author






Clare E Kenny
Leadership, culture and wellbeing consultant
TEDx & Keynote Speaker

I help organisations create high-performance cultures where people thrive. With extensive experience in leadership, culture, and wellbeing strategy, I’ve worked with FTSE 100 companies, fast-growing start-ups, and global brands - including Burberry, Warner Bros Discovery, KPMG, Channel 4, and Harry Potter Studios.

My work goes beyond quick-fix wellbeing and culture initiatives to tackle the real drivers of engagement, performance, and retention - so that businesses see measurable results.

Want to chat?

Connect with me here:

-  www.linkedin.com/in/clare-e-kenny
-  www.clareEkenny.com
-  clare@clareEkenny.com



Let’s keep in touch...

 [CONNECT](#) with me on LinkedIn

 [DROP](#) me an email

 [SUBSCRIBE](#) to my newsletter

 [LISTEN](#) to my podcast

 [EXPLORE](#) my website

