

FREE GUIDE · CLARE E KENNY

Making the case for sustainable performance

How to show your board this is not a nice add on. It is a solid return on investment, and it belongs in the same category as your other business-critical priorities.



Lived it. Built it. Not borrowed research.

You probably don't need convincing that this matters. Chances are your board needs a bit more nudging!

I've seen this from both sides. I've lived it myself, including years of undiagnosed ADHD and anxiety, so I know firsthand what a dysregulated nervous system does to focus, decision-making, and how you show up as a leader.

I've also built and run the wellbeing strategy inside Burberry, while the pressure was real, not theoretical. This isn't borrowed research. It's what I've lived, what I've done, and what I now help other organisations do properly.

ORGANISATIONS I'VE WORKED WITH

HSBC • KPMG • Novartis • Harry Potter Studios • NHS • Rakuten • Vestas • Specsavers



"We've got all this in place, but it's really not our day-to-day reality!"

Nearly every organisation I speak to has already tried something. A workshop, a wellbeing week, a fruit bowl in the kitchen, an app subscription, a people policy that reads brilliantly on paper. And constantly, I hear the same thing:

"It's lovely that HR says this, but our leaders role model the complete opposite."

"I'd never actually use the mental health day, my manager would hold it against me!"

That's the yawning chasm between the PR version of an organisation and the real one. The PR version has the policies, the perks, the wellbeing week. The real version is what happens when someone's overloaded at 8pm on a Thursday, whether they feel safe enough to say so, and whether their manager's behaviour reflects what's written in the handbook.

Perks can be nice, great even! But they were built to alleviate symptoms, not to fix root causes. When all you have are perks and no behavioural change, you can end up doing an awful lot of work, spending a lot of money, and unfortunately changing very little.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEMS UNDERNEATH ALL OF THIS

It's not a mindset problem. **It's biology.**

When someone feels under threat, overloaded, unheard, uncertain, criticised, their nervous system responds the way it's built to: it prioritises survival over performance. Resources shift away from the prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for clear thinking, judgement, creativity and connection, and toward whatever keeps them safe in the moment.

And it's animal instinct. It's unavoidable.

This is the science behind what's often called psychological safety: the belief that you can speak up, take a risk, or admit a mistake without your nervous system reading it as a threat.

It's not a soft skill sitting next to the "real" work. It's the biological precondition for anyone doing their best thinking.



Sustainable high performance isn't about pushing harder

In survival mode, decisions get worse, collaboration narrows, people play it safer, and anyone who processes the world differently, whether that's neurodivergence, anxiety, or simply being newer or more junior in the room, finds it even harder to participate fully.

If someone stays in that state for long enough without proper recovery, they risk tipping into burnout.

Sustainable high performance is about creating the conditions where people's nervous systems can regularly come out of survival mode and perform at their best.



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This session was honestly the best webinar I have ever attended... particularly around psychological safety and the importance of moving beyond surface level wellbeing solutions to address the real factors that shape people's experience at work.

ALEX GOODANNEW

Employee Engagement Manager, OVO



"Band-Aids don't fix bullet holes"

Taylor Swift

Giving people tools to cope with a broken environment isn't nothing, but it's not enough on its own. It treats the symptom while the actual root cause carries on doing damage. What drives change in the long term is addressing the cultural norms and leadership behaviours creating the problem in the first place, not just handing out coping skills that ease the symptoms.

That means reaching the people who influence culture the most, the leaders. It means working on behavioural change, ways of working and leadership habits, not just personal coping strategies that help people survive an environment without ever changing it.

You can't constantly self-regulate your way through an environment that keeps **dysregulating you.**

"She doesn't approach wellbeing as a simple tick-box exercise. She considers every element of a business, from processes and ways of working to culture and leadership, to create impactful and measurable results."

CHARLOTTE POTTER

Global Health and Safety team, Burberry



Leaders regulating themselves first

A group of leaders I worked with started noticing the impact of their own emotional state on their team: when they walked into a meeting stressed and unregulated, it visibly had a knock-on effect on everyone in the room. As a group, they committed to taking a short break before team meetings and high-stakes moments, a quick walk, a few minutes of breathing, some gentle movement, whatever helped them come back to baseline.

But not only did they take time for this self-regulation, they were vocal about it too, telling their teams they were doing this and why, and actively encouraging people to do the same. That gave everyone else permission to interrupt their stress cycles too, rather than carry it straight into the next meeting. Teams reported coming in calmer and genuinely more ready to collaborate.

"Not only has taking time to self-regulate made me a calmer leader, it's made me a much nicer dad and husband. We should make self-regulation breaks mandatory for everyone."



Small, repeatable behaviours. Significant culture change.

Making mistakes safe to raise

One leader started a regular slot in team meetings for sharing mistakes and what was learned from them and made a point of going first every time to show it was genuinely safe. Within a few weeks, the team was raising problems earlier, not because anyone had been told to, but because they'd watched their leader do it without anything bad happening to them.

"It's been great having a dedicated space in our monthly wash-up for sharing learnings and mistakes. It makes it feel a lot less scary when something goes wrong."

Building in more than one way to contribute

Another simply built more than one way for people to contribute in meetings: a chat function running alongside the discussion, an anonymous survey, space for people to reflect before responding rather than react on the spot. Nothing about the meeting's content changed, only who felt able to take part in it, particularly neurodivergent team members who'd previously gone quiet the moment the format demanded an instant, spoken answer.

"Our meetings feel so much more inclusive now. And I'm getting insights and feedback I would never have heard before!"

None of these are big interventions. They're small, repeatable behaviours a leader chooses to keep doing, which incrementally build to significant culture change.



A nervous system issue **at scale**

Burnout isn't just stress. It's what happens when chronic, unmanaged pressure carries on long enough without recovery, showing up as exhaustion, cynicism and a real drop in effectiveness, often in your most engaged, highest-performing people first.

Personal resilience strategies help, but they're not enough on their own. Research from the McKinsey Health Institute draws a useful distinction:

Demands

Workload, time pressure, role conflict, "always on" norms. These are what drive burnout risk up.

Enablers

Psychological safety, autonomy, growth. These support genuine wellbeing and performance, but they can't cancel out excessive demands.

You can have a brilliant wellbeing programme and still see high burnout if the underlying workload and culture haven't changed. Prevention is a shared responsibility: people can build some resilience, but it's leaders and organisations that determine whether sustainable performance, not working in constant survival mode, becomes the norm.



Same argument, different words

"Wellbeing perks"



"The conditions that determine whether your best people perform, burn out, or leave."

"Mental health support"



"Protecting the decision-making capacity of your workforce."

"Resilience training"



"Reducing the demands creating the need for resilience in the first place."

"Nice to have"



"The thing keeping your highest performers stuck in survival mode."

Numbers your board **will** act on

Amy Edmondson's foundational research

Expected to find that the best-performing teams made fewer mistakes. It found the opposite: they reported more. Not because they made more errors, but because they worked in a climate where problems could be raised and dealt with early, instead of hidden until they became bigger ones.

Google's Project Aristotle

When Google's own People team studied what really made teams effective, their conclusion was blunt: who's on a team matters less than how the team works together. Of the five factors that separated their best teams from the rest, psychological safety came out the most important by far.

22.1 million

Working days lost to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in Great Britain in 2024/25 (HSE, 2025).

£1 → £4.70

Every £1 spent on workplace mental health returns £4.70 on average, rising to £6.30 when the fix is organisation-wide rather than aimed at individuals (Deloitte, 2024).

THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

What stays broken **stays expensive**

- Errors and near-misses that don't get flagged until they're unavoidable (and expensive).
- People stuck in survival mode with poorer judgement, less collaboration and innovation, more mistakes and reactivity.
- Your most engaged, highest-performing people burning out first, going off on long term sick and/or leaving.
- Blind spots leadership completely miss, because the people who can see them, including those who think or process differently, don't feel safe enough to say so.





Opening the conversation, **handling the pushback**

Ways to open

"I want to flag something that's showing up in [attrition / burnout / near-misses], and I think it's connected."

"This isn't about morale or wellbeing perks. It's about decision quality, speed and retention, and there's a measurable return on fixing it."

"I'm not asking for a new initiative. I'm asking for 20 minutes to walk you through what this is costing us."

If you hear pushback

"We already invested in wellbeing."

Perks and policies support health. They don't fix the workload, unclear roles or leadership behaviour driving the risk of burnout and impacting the performance of our people.

"We don't have budget for a new initiative."

This isn't a new initiative. It's what determines whether your existing ones can work.

"This feels like a soft skill / nice to have."

Google's own research found psychological safety to be the single biggest driver of team performance they could measure, and the biology behind decision-making under pressure backs it up too.

READY TO BUILD THE CASE?

Knowing this matters, and knowing how to build it, are **two** **different things.**

If you're ready to build the case to drive cultural change, get in touch and we can talk it through. No pressure, just get in touch whenever it's useful.

Get in touch • clare@clareekenny.com



"She has a gift for content design, not just creating learning materials, but an actual experience for whoever attends her sessions. She creates an environment where people feel psychologically safe to contribute, challenge themselves, and grow."

MARIA PANTOLIOU

Senior Talent & Development Advisor, Colliers