

Boost your team's energy

Are you noticing higher levels of fatigue in your people? Many managers are reporting more of their team members are “running out of puff”, taking longer to get tasks done, and dropping down on energy. Amanda Wallis and Gaynor Parkin examine what we can do about it.

We are also hearing more about overwork, exhaustion and the three components that are characteristic of burning out: energy depletion, mental distance from work and reduced effectiveness. Concerningly, recent research from the **World Health Organization** speaks to the dangers of working more than 55 hours a week as a risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

We have a responsibility to look after our teams so they make it through each working week safe and healthy and with energy to bring their whole selves to work. More than that, we can aspire to help people finish work each day in an even better state than they arrived in.

It's an ambitious goal, but one we can achieve when we rethink

what is possible. Burnout, overwork and exhaustion must be priority agenda items for executive teams and the boardroom, noting that organisational factors (ie, work design) play a large role in protecting mental wellbeing at work.

While change is needed at every level, each of us can take simple steps. You can help boost the wellbeing and energy of your people, especially during busier months.

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Science of positive psychology

According to pioneering researchers Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology is a field of science that strives to promote flourishing and fulfilment at individual, group and societal levels.

Positive psychology rests on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, cultivate what is best within themselves, and enhance their experiences of love, work and play.

Contrary to what some media portray, positive psychology is not the science of happiness. Instead, it is the science of all that goes right, rather than wrong, with people. This does, of course, include happiness, but it's more than that. It encompasses resilience, perseverance, courage, optimism, curiosity and a broad range of other hopeful topics.

Importantly, positive psychology is highly relevant to business because it is fundamentally about high performance, and how to allow people to do their best. Smart studies have investigated how much an upbeat mood reduces the time it takes a **team of doctors** to make a tricky diagnosis and shown that a social worker will make twice as many visits to clients if they **feel appreciated**. Other research has demonstrated that using optimistic thinking is helpful for **salespeople** to bounce back from setbacks.

How can we use positive psychology to boost our teams? Try one or more of the following strategies with your team and see what effect they have. Don't forget to check in and ask for feedback too.

Build on team strengths

Described as '**character strengths**', these are internal strengths: doing what we are best



at naturally, such as in the areas of leadership, perseverance, fairness or humour. One of the immediate benefits of using strengths is that it makes tasks that align with our strengths feel enjoyable and less effortful. Crucially, acting using our strengths should be energising rather than exhausting, helping us tackle the fatigue our team members might be experiencing.

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Using our strengths affords us a myriad of positive emotions: a sense of mastery, success and competence, to name a few. Struggling with weaknesses does the opposite. We're more likely to benefit if we know and fully understand our strengths, and if we are using them. **Peterson and Peterson** found that law students who used their top strengths were at reduced risk for anxiety and depression and were more satisfied in life.

To build on your team strengths, get everyone to take a mental (perhaps private) note of how competent and fulfilled they've been feeling at work. Then have everyone on your team complete the free **VIA Strengths Assessment** and share their reflections (if they feel comfortable doing so). Have each member talk about when they've used their strengths, how it worked, how they felt. How could people bring their strengths to bear on a current issue? How could people use their strengths even more in their work? Make a plan. After a trial period (maybe after a project is over), get everyone to re-rate their sense of competence and fulfilment to see if it has made a positive difference or not.

One of the greatest benefits of these strengths conversations is that we discover the diversity of our colleagues' strengths, and that no one strength is 'better' than another. While organisation, attention to detail and order might rank lowest on one person's strengths list, they might be someone else's 'happy place'. The more we acknowledge the individual diversity our team members bring, the more we can enable them to do the tasks that they find truly meaningful (and perform best doing!).

Keep in mind that the goal of a strengths discussion isn't to make people change their strengths or develop their weaknesses; it's about encouraging greater use of the strengths they already feel good about.

Boost positive emotion

A strong body of **research** has demonstrated that purposefully experiencing more positive emotion is linked with both improved performance and enhanced wellbeing. The mechanism for how this works is both neurochemical and physiological: experiencing positive emotions like joy, hope, achievement, satisfaction and gratitude signal to our bodies and brains that a stress state is not required and take us instead into a calm, optimum zone.

Professor Barbara Fredrickson is a leading psychological researcher in this field. She has described the transformative powers of positive emotions as the '**broaden and build**' phenomena. Her studies have shown that experiencing more positive emotion broadens the scope of attention and cognition, and therefore the behavioural options that are available to us. This research explains why we are more likely to be creative when we are in a

positive mood, more innovative, and perform better.

A practical finding from this research is that the intensity of the emotion – how strong the feeling feels – does not determine the benefits so much as the frequency of experiencing positive emotions. It is how often you have a good feeling that matters. Sharing a joke with a colleague, taking 10 minutes to enjoy the quiz with your team, celebrating small wins, or saying thanks to your admin support are all short but effective positive emotion boosts during the day.

What small steps can you take to facilitate more positive emotion in your team? Perhaps a team tradition of sharing weekend stories has dropped away as workloads have increased? Or celebrating successes, or a ritual of the daily quiz over coffee? Pay attention to when you and your team already experience positive emotion at work. What were

you doing? Then plan how you can facilitate more of these experiences within your team interactions.

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Experience more flow

The idea of ‘**flow**’ has been around for some time but has attracted more attention recently as information from neuroscience studies adds scientific weight to the concept. Flow is a state of activity where time goes by unnoticed, our skill level matches the challenge perfectly, and we feel like we’re completely ‘in the zone’.

Hungarian psychologist Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first

described flow as the state we experience when our concentration is high, we experience deep satisfaction, we stop feeling self-conscious (or self-critical) and we don’t notice time. You may have experienced flow when you are completely absorbed in a hobby you enjoy, in conversation with a loved one, or completing a satisfying project at work.

Experiencing flow is beneficial to our wellbeing because it produces positive emotions, meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life, allowing us to get in touch with our true selves and what we are good at. Being in a state of flow helps us persist with challenging tasks, which leads to the further development of skills and greater performance. **Studies** also suggest that greater experience of flow at work can improve our energy levels at the end of the day, helping protect us against fatigue.





Discuss with your team members to see how much flow they experience and what accommodations you can make to help them experience more.

If certain team members' skills are not high enough to meet the challenge of their current tasks, they are more likely to be experiencing anxiety than flow. For these people, ensure that they have access to appropriate resources, mentoring and support to build their skills. Flow also becomes more likely when people get frequent feedback so they can see progress and adjust what they are doing. In addition, these team members may benefit from taking on additional tasks that better match their skill level so they may still experience flow while on the upskilling path.

For team members whose skills exceed the challenge they face, and are experiencing boredom rather than flow, consider delegating them new, more challenging tasks.

It may also be necessary for team members to dial back on distractions to achieve a flow state. As a manager, you can support team members to set aside blocks of time for 'deep work', where they are permitted to set an out-of-office message on their email to avoid distractions. Recent **research** also shows that daily goal setting can be a useful tool to increase flow at work, leading to greater performance and lower daily stress.

Think of these team tools from positive psychology as a toolkit rather than a recipe; you don't need to use them all at once to see positive outcomes, and not all strategies will work for every team. Take an experimental approach and see what works for you and your teams.



Gaynor Parkin is a registered clinical psychologist and CEO at Umbrella Wellbeing. A psychologist with nearly three decades' experience in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Gaynor is

dedicated to helping New Zealand businesses thrive. Twelve years ago, she published her book, *I've had it up to here: From stress to strength*, detailing how to handle work stress and build resilience. As well as working closely with senior leadership teams to devise and apply those solutions, she dedicates time to contributing to the growing wealth of wellbeing research and literature.



Dr Amanda Wallis leads the research programme at Umbrella Wellbeing. Amanda is fascinated by the 'why' of human behaviour. At its core, her work is devoted to helping understand and support people

to engage in behaviours they want to be doing, but struggle with: whether that's exercising, creating psychologically safe teams, or learning how to 'switch off' from work. Her passion is in translating research into practical strategies for change and she is dedicated to expanding our collective knowledge about 'what works' when it comes to behaviour change.