Why 'carewashing' will drive employees away

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- **Key insight:** Learn why executive and manager buy-in determines wellness program effectiveness.
- **What's at stake:** Reputation risk from "carewashing" could erode retention and employer brand.
- **Expert quote:** Wellness requires cultural integration, not just benefits, Hanna Hasl-Kelchner observes.
- *Source: Bullets generated by AI with editorial review*

Benefit leaders work hard to ensure employees have access to wellness support. But if offerings aren't also championed by leaders outside of the benefits department, workers may not buy in.

Despite a growing amount of wellness benefits in the workplace, less than a quarter of employees strongly believe their organization cares about their well-being, and only 38% feel they are respected at work, according to Gallup. This marks a troubling trend that wellness offerings alone can't change.

Worse, it can lead to a reputation for "carewashing" — a term coined by the Harvard Business Review — where a company touts wellness initiatives and benefits but contradicts them with a negative work environment.

"Employee wellness is about a culture, not just EAP benefits or your medical or dental," says Hanna Hasl-Kelchner, business strategist, author and host of the Business Confidential Now podcast. Instead of keeping benefits and daily business in silos, they should run alongside each other in the eyes of benefit leaders and other organizational management, she stresses. "The relationship that the employer has with the employee goes down to the individual manager and having more awareness of certain behaviors that don't inspire trust."

The need to build better trust is urgent: A report from creative technology agency WongDoody found that 62% of employees experienced loss of sleep, crying, mental health issues and destructive behavior due to work-induced stress, and 59% felt invisible, undervalued and replaceable.

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Easy areas for workplace improvement

Hasl-Kelchner cites major transitions like return-to-office as opportunities for leaders to demonstrate support for their team members' well-being. For example, if this has caused issues such as child care challenges or long commutes, communicating about flexible work arrangements within policy boundaries, or benefits that can ease these burdens, can help keep stress at a minimum.

On a day-to-day basis, managers who check in with their teams and seek out ways to make their workdays more manageable will see better effort and output from employees, Hasl-Kelchner says.

"Be curious, ask questions — not just, 'How's that project going,' but 'What would make next week better than this week?'" she says. "It's that extra discretionary effort that employers really want and they deserve, but they also have to earn it."

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Along with any feedback-based adjustments, leaders can express commitment to action with reminders about EAP services and other offerings that may be able to help employees — an area benefit and HR leaders can train them for, Hasl-Kelchner says. If this is a task better left to HR, the manager can suggest or facilitate a meeting.

By creating a system of backing up culture with benefits, benefit leaders and team managers can establish stronger relationships and better production outcomes for employees. Start small, be consistent, and trust will grow, says Hasl-Kelchner.

"A lot of it comes down to communication, self reflection and awareness by management," she says. "Focus on what matters to [employees], because if that comes through, then you're also communicating, 'You matter, I want you to be successful, and when you're successful, we are successful.'"