SUPPORTING WELLBEING IN EMOTIONALLY DEMANDING WORK

A toolkit for building organisational resilience by supporting your people.

Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

KUDU

Introduction

Meaningful work can carry emotional weight, and without the right support and opportunities to recover, this can lead to emotional exhaustion.

This isn’t just an individual issue, it’s also about the conditions at our work. We may have different levels of influence over this but there are steps that people can take at any level of an organisation.

We can’t create sustainable impact through unsustainable human systems

Wellbeing is shaped by culture, leadership, workload and relationships. Surface-level wellbeing initiatives can’t compensate for unhealthy systems, they should be added value.



Creating the right organisational conditions



The conditions that protect people over the long term

- **Acknowledgment of the emotional load.** People are not weak in this sector if they are struggling. Acknowledge the emotional strain of the work.

- **Equipping managers to support people.** Equip staff to notice the signs of when people are overloaded, do something about it, and know when to escalate.

- **Creating space for reflection and support.** Structured supervision and check ins are essential, to see how people are, not just checking in on workload. As well as debriefing after pieces of work or projects end. More informal peer support is also helpful.





- **Realistic workload.** Work is always going to feel urgent, but there needs to be the backing to rest, and sometimes being told to rest. People need to be protected from unrealistic expectations and the sense of never-ending urgency.

- **Boundaries are respected.** It is essential staff get recovery time away from work and are not expected to be constantly available.

- **People feel aligned with values.** Staff feel happier when their values are aligned with the organisation's values.

Support happens in day-to-day interactions

- Managers are often frontline. They should lead by example.
- Peer relationships also matter, especially in hybrid / isolated roles. Find ways to stay connected.
- Small conversations prevent silent build-up of pressure. Don’t undervalue those day-to-day check ins.
- Teams need psychologically safe spaces to speak honestly. Create time for active listening. Share your own experience and challenges to create permission for others to share.



Practical actions to strengthen sustainable performance





Equip the people in the system

- Create space for open supportive conversations, reflection, and peer connection.
- Provide training and support for staff alongside wellbeing champions.
- Encourage and model visibly healthy boundaries including taking leave, not glorifying overwork, and openly setting boundaries.

Design work more sustainably

- Review unrealistic workloads and deadlines.
- Reduce reliance on chronic overload and overworking such as late nights or early mornings, and put boundaries in place. Otherwise it doesn’t show the problems with workload.
- Rotate emotionally heavy work where possible.

- Encourage use of leave.
- Normalise asking for and providing support.
- Build recovery into planning — don’t just go from one thing to another.

Reinforce purpose, alignment and recovery

- Reconnect people with the impact of the work – with meaning not just metrics.
- Recognise people’s contribution by connecting with shared progress and impact.
- Align operational decisions with values.
- Create opportunities for people to connect with nature.



Champion wellbeing from the ground up



ShamPhat Photography

Even if you don’t have managerial, leadership or decision-making responsibilities, you can still influence healthier conditions.

- Build understanding of why staff wellbeing is important and how it aligns with the organisational strategy, this opens up doors for further conversations and action.
- Find statistics to show the impact and benefits, including around staff retention, the impact of burnout, and the productivity benefits of a supported workforce.
- Think about what is in the realm of possibility. Discuss with colleagues small ways to have more connection, bring nature in, and create reflection spaces. These can be small things that don’t need permission from senior staff.
- Become wellbeing champions and share what you’re doing with other teams. It can have a domino effect.



If we want long-term sustainable impact, we need to build organisations that sustain the people doing the work too.

Alongside this, there is still a responsibility for people to look after themselves, for example by putting boundaries in and taking leave. Look at our spotlight on staying well in climate work for more guidance.

Acknowledgment

This toolkit has been developed using the expertise and insights of Leanne Bird, founder of KUDU People & Workplace.

To find out more about how KUDU supports organisations to create healthier, more sustainable workplaces, visit www.kudupeople.co.uk.

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