

LEADERSHIP

All things modern leadership, from people management advice to profiles on trailblazing C-suite powerhouses who are redefining what it means to influence innovation.

Refreshing Lives: Why Well-Being Must Be Every Leader's Business

By James Quincey, Chairman and CEO, The Coca-Cola Company

This World Mental Health Day, two statistics keep echoing in my mind: 72% of U.S. employees report moderate to very high stress at work (Insurance Business, 2025), and an all-time high of 66% are experiencing burnout in today's demanding workplace (Forbes, 2025). Especially in our post-pandemic world, the lines between work and life have become blurred, and the pressure to be on 24/7 is having dangerous ripple effects on employees' mental health. This modern work culture is fueling stress in unprecedented ways and leading to record-high burnout rates.

As leaders, we have a responsibility to initiate change and support our employees' holistic well-being, ensuring that wellness is at the foundation of our businesses. At The Coca-Cola Company, we have learned that when we nurture our people's health, creativity, and balance, we are not just supporting their future, we are empowering them to help refresh the world. And perhaps no group is reminding us of this more than the next generation entering the workforce.

According to recent Gen Z studies, 84% of Gen Zers believe mental health is a crisis in the U.S., and they are over 80% more likely to report dealing with anxiety or depression compared to older generations (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025). The pandemic further intensified many of these challenges. This generation also defines success differently: traditional perks are no longer enough, and priorities like mental health, time off, and flexibility have become essential.

When it comes to Gen Z's relationship with brands, Olivia Tompkins, Senior Account Executive of Corporate Reputation and Global Knowledge Manager of the Gen Z Lab at Edelman, explains, "We're not looking to brands to fix society; we're looking to them to show up in our lives with optimism, clarity, and care. We value emotional connection as much as ethical alignment, and we notice when brands make our world feel more stable, even in small, personal ways. Gen Z doesn't expect perfection, but we do expect progress, consistency, and proof. We want brands to show up as the company they say they are, not just when the spotlight is on, but when no one is looking. We want actions, not just awareness" (Edelman, 2025).

If companies want to stay competitive, they must align with what younger employees value and meet this generation where they are, focusing on care and belonging and living out that truth. At Coca-Cola, we emphasize staying curious, empowered, inclusive, and agile. Supporting this generation and our employees' well-being overall is not just the right thing to do, it is essential to attracting the innovators and changemakers of tomorrow.

That is where we come in as leaders. Well-being is a crucial part of a company's ESG and social impact, and we must truly demonstrate that commitment. At Coca-Cola, we pride ourselves on a high-performing culture built on inclusion and well-being, but we are still working on it every day, continuing to grow and listen to our employees and customers. Investing in people and their well-being leads to innovation, creativity, and stronger engagement. According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report, companies with engaged employees see 23% higher profitability (Gallup, 2025). Additionally, organizations that prioritize well-being report up to 20% higher productivity and reduced absenteeism (Global Wellness Institute, 2025).

At The Coca-Cola Company, we have introduced initiatives that make well-being part of our culture, not just a benefit. From flexible schedules and mental health resources to leadership training that fosters

empathy and inclusion, our goal is to ensure every employee feels supported, valued, and empowered to bring their whole selves to work. We have created a mental health support program that provides free counseling sessions for personal and professional challenges, as well as a mindfulness app that supports employees' mental well-being through meditation sessions and courses designed to help with sleep difficulties, stress reduction, and overall mood (Life at Coca-Cola, 2025).

Well-being is not a trend. It is the foundation of sustainable business. I encourage other leaders to listen to their employees, prioritize supporting them, and see the impact that makes on their people and their purpose. When we invest in well-being, we are investing in a better, more optimistic, and more connected future for all.

Strategy Note

This thought leadership piece is intended for Fast Company's Leadership section and will be published on World Mental Health Day. The article aims to inspire and empower leaders to prioritize employee well-being as a driver of creativity and long-term success. The tone is empathetic, motivating, and aspirational, reflecting Coca-Cola's human-centered leadership philosophy and its Real Magic platform. By emphasizing genuine care, active listening, and responsible innovation, the messaging aligns with Coca-Cola's commitment to creating a culture where people thrive and meaningful connections are made.