

Wellbeing: An HR Pathway to Sustainability*

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Abstract

Wellbeing is undoubtedly fundamentally important to society and businesses. The current health situation has placed the question of people's health at the heart of day-to-day discussions, albeit on a different level. The deaths, suffering and hardship associated with the pandemic, and the urgency to deal with them, have brought about the reawakening of a general awareness, a renewed sensitivity to people's wellbeing. Although a good thing, it has been attenuated by the effects of the pandemic and also the lifestyle that could cause many more victims.

Keywords: Sustainability; Wellbeing; COVID-19; Positive Emotions; Global Markets

1. The So-called Non-Communicable Diseases of COVID-19

According to some beliefs and prophecies, 21st December 2012 was the date on the Gregorian calendar on which an unspecified type of event of planetary proportions would occur and produce a significant historical break from the past: a drastic spiritual transformation of humanity or the end of the world. The highly-anticipated event was temporarily linked to the end of the thirteenth cycle (baktun) on the Mayan calendar.

But 2012 came and went and no specific catastrophic events happened until 2020. And if we consider that the Maya civilization is nearly 5,000 years old, eight years is a perfectly acceptable margin for error in such a long-term forecast.

We will never know if the prophecy was fulfilled in 2020. But we do know what did happen.

A pandemic that is causing countless victims, and also profoundly altering economic and social processes, forcing everyone to rethink their routines, approaches, working methods, lifestyles, and how they interact with others.

* Invited Article

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At the same time, if Covid is the black swan of health that ignites fear and catalyses media attention, the prestigious scientific journal *The Lancet*, (Kluge et al., 2020; *The Lancet*, 2020) highlighted how hidden between the anxiety fuelling news about infection rates and the uncertainty of lockdowns, our society had already fallen victim to other pandemics, which were less explosive in the eyes of the press, but much more worrying in terms of health. We are talking about the so-called noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), namely diseases that are not passed from person to person and depend on socioeconomic factors and lifestyle choices, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, stroke, neurodegenerative diseases, cancers, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome. NCDs kill 41 million people every year, equivalent to 71% of all deaths globally (WHO Time to Deliver report).

If we also add to these two scenarios (one alarming and disturbing, the other silent but worrying) the fact that depression has become one of the most common illnesses in recent years (Malhi & Mann, 2018), that there has been a steep increase in antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication use, even before Covid (AIFA, 2017), and that burnout is on the rise in every industrialised nation and was included by the WHO as a globally recognised syndrome (WHO, 2019), we see a rather worrying picture being painted of the state of human beings in the contemporary world.

However, the dramatic, world-changing event that is Covid could actually represent a turning point: it caused pain and fear and this seems to have brought the importance of people and their wellbeing back within the focus of the political, economic and corporate debate, thereby increasing the amount of attention (and even compassion) placed on the experiences of individuals and how they feel.

Maybe the time has come to start to ask ourselves more pressing questions more seriously and change some of our views and beliefs about the paradigms within which we make choices, including within our organisations.

2. Sustainability as a New Paradigm

We believe that this renewed attention falls within a new paradigm that is starting to emerge more centrally in the way our social, economic and workplace lives are organised: a sustainability paradigm, or rather the possibility of integrating and balancing the immediate and future benefits of a choice and assessing their impact across a wider system and with a broader outlook. An initial, important indication that we are heading in this new direction comes from the United Nations which provided a route and reference framework for countries and institutions while developing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With regard to private organisations, an ever-increasing number of companies are requesting and obtaining B Corp certification, (<https://bcorporation.net/>) an organisation that certifies a company's interest in and ability to generate value for its entire network of stakeholders, rather than solely for shareholders, through sustainable and integrated external and internal policies and choices. This also applies in Italy: the recent formation of a Ministry of Ecological Transition marks a change from choices driven by industrial policies to one more influenced by sustainable development.

So, we have a new context of greater awareness of and focus on the human factor and less attention limited to only the economics of business. We believe that this means that the HR department can and must play a key role in helping organisations to really commit to the sustainability challenge, going further than the commendable initiatives to do away with plastic or assisting and funding the third sector, and placing the sustainability of human resources firmly at the centre of any internal policies and decisions, thereby favouring their wellbeing and flourishing.

3. Wellbeing and Flourishing

It is common knowledge that wellbeing is linked to performance. We do not need to turn to studies and statistics to say that we do better when we are happy and healthy; we know this from our personal experience. And if we needed further confirmation, there are plenty of surveys to back this up. For example, Gallup describes how a lack of wellbeing, which leads to dissatisfaction and burnout, can have a direct impact on productivity: almost 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, 16% lower profitability, and 65% lower share price over time (Harter et al., 2020). So, encouraging employee wellbeing is a sound, rational motivation linked to the possibility of having better levels of performance and a higher probability of success. This means that if we look after the wellbeing of people at work, we are also looking after the wellbeing of companies and their prosperity.

So, there are clear, recognised reasons for investing in wellbeing. However, in this article we wish to highlight more specifically how the subject of wellbeing is relevant today, and not just because the pandemic has created situations in which people are suffering that need to be handled urgently, but because wellbeing above all is the key to a better future. In fact, it is only through actions designed to build conditions, contexts and behaviours that promote people's wellbeing that we can work on growing and realising their full potential. This is why we are so keen on the term flourishing (Seligman, 2011), which suggests blossoming and blooming. Someone who is happy and healthy is clearly someone who functions better; they have more energy, and are more likely to convey this to others, plus they have greater resources for themselves and to share with others. This is why the term wellbeing is so apt; it conveys value, worth and dignity, indicating someone who is full of confidence and potential.

In this respect, promoting wellbeing means cultivating people's beauty, talents, value and opportunities and this undoubtedly translates into performance, but there also seems to be something larger and more ambitious. When we talk about the future and sustainability, it seems that wellbeing and flourishing are much more concrete and useful for heading in this direction.

But, first of all, we wish to debunk a few myths or oversimplifications about wellbeing. Wellbeing does not mean that people are completely and continuously "contented" and satisfied, nor does it mean tempering every corporate decision to accommodate the wishes of the employees for fear of making them unhappy and therefore less productive. This is a utopian vision that would make any type of organisation inflexible.

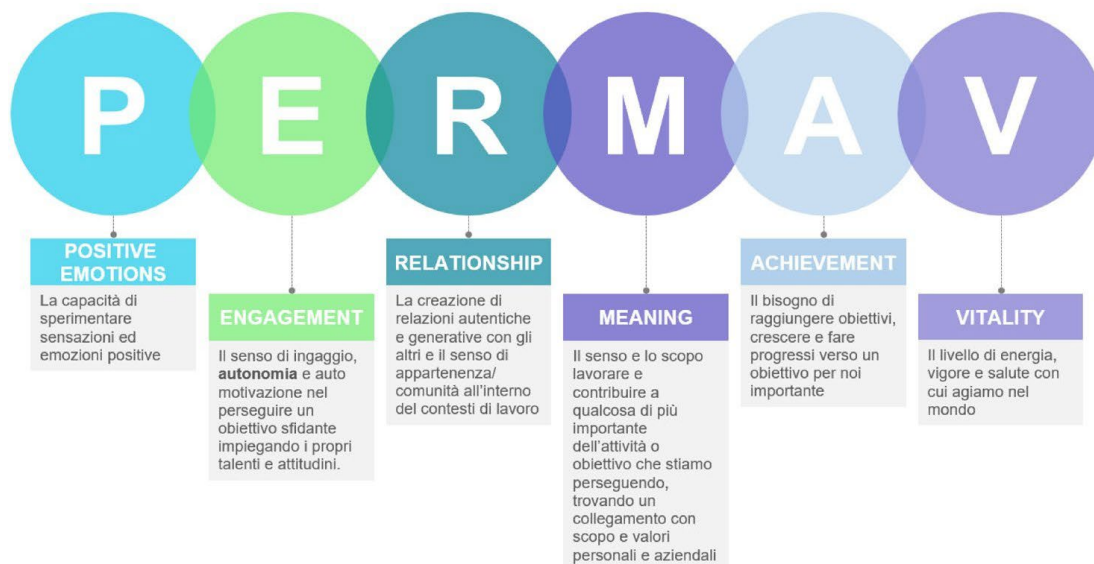
But it goes further than that; we firmly believe that even stress, difficulties and frustration can have a transformative power. If we think about it, training and physical exercise are not always pleasurable, indeed they are often very hard work and require a great deal of effort, commitment and sacrifice. But millions of people put their bodies through that now so that they may “flourish” in the future. And this in itself generates wellbeing, even if it is tough.

So, wellbeing is a broader, more complex construct than pleasure or satisfaction. It may encompass them, but is not closely defined by them in a biunique relationship. For example, I can feel dissatisfied with the new remote-working policy, yet still feel that my place of work allows me to fully express my potential, my talent, my values, my humanity and social interaction. In other words, my flourishing.

4. What is Wellbeing?

The construct of wellbeing primarily stems from positive psychology and was promoted by the psychologist Martin Seligman, who was the first to begin shifting the focus of research in psychology away from illness and malaise towards wellbeing, positive emotions, and more generally to environmental conditions and individual behaviours that allow people to live a fuller, more satisfying and rewarding life, even when faced with difficulties, challenges and obstacles. A life of flourishing that is human rather than material.

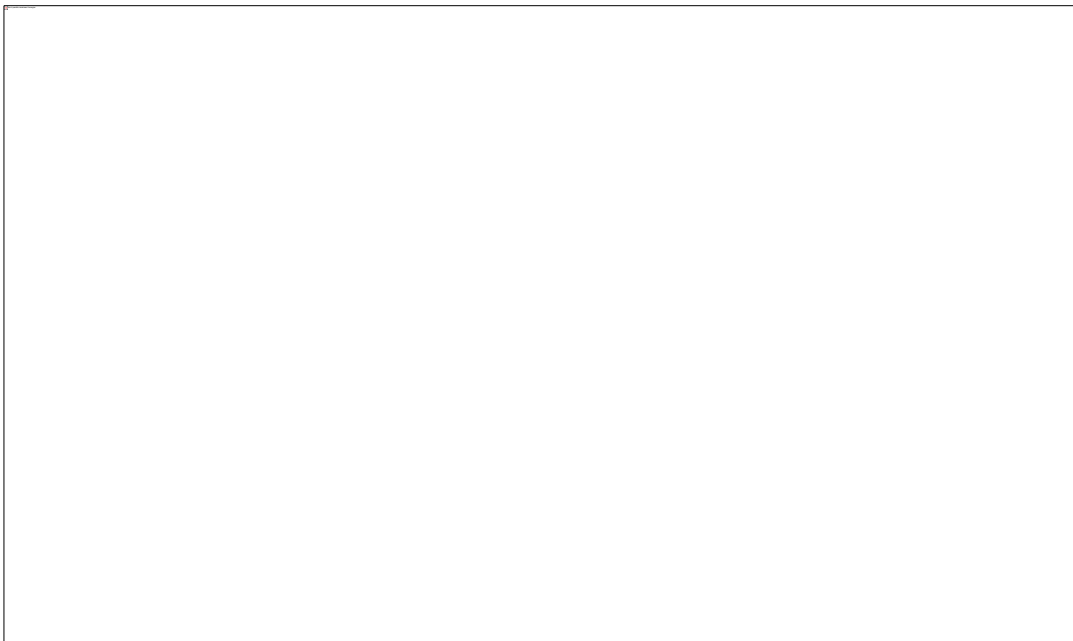
One of the most interesting models that helps us to really understand this construct is PERMA (Seligman, 2011), an acronym of the variables and factors that help to generate wellbeing and enable people to experience the state of flourishing.¹



5. Positive Emotions

The first dimension of the wellbeing model concerns the positive emotions that represent the barometer of feeling good. The wider the range of emotions and the more frequently we feel them, the higher our level of wellbeing. Barbara Fredrickson has studied the function of positive emotions in more depth than anyone, and it is from her work (Fredrickson, 2004) that we learn that when we feel this type of emotions, our mind becomes more flexible, creative and dynamic, our perception broadens helping us to see connections and feel a sense of oneness, and our heart opens, making us kinder, grateful, and open to others.

Qualities that are definitely important in current organisational contexts for managing the growing complexities and knowing how to handle the current crisis. But what are these positive emotions? Fredrickson identified ten emotions that form the construct of positivity, each with its own specific evolutionary function and drive to action.



Even though you would probably never find some of these emotions in the vocabulary of most managers or companies (which is usually restricted to words like motivation or engagement), we can see how if some of them (gratitude, inspiration, pride) were more present in our organisations, they could have a greater effect on people's wellbeing and also on their cognitive and motivational performance, which could greatly benefit the famous bottom line.

But especially in environments and contexts dominated by "negative" emotions, such as rage, the fear of getting it wrong, the envy over a colleague's success, the shame and sense of guilt as a lever for behavioral change, helping managers, bosses

and everyone to pursue and better generate positive emotions is one of the ways we can begin to increase wellbeing.

6. Engagement

Engagement is understood as the state of flow, namely the state we achieve when we are completely involved in an activity and our skills expand. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), the “father” of the state of flow concept, describes flow as the moment we enter a state of deep concentration and become one with the task we are doing: noise ceases, the sense of time disappears, and creativity and productivity increase.

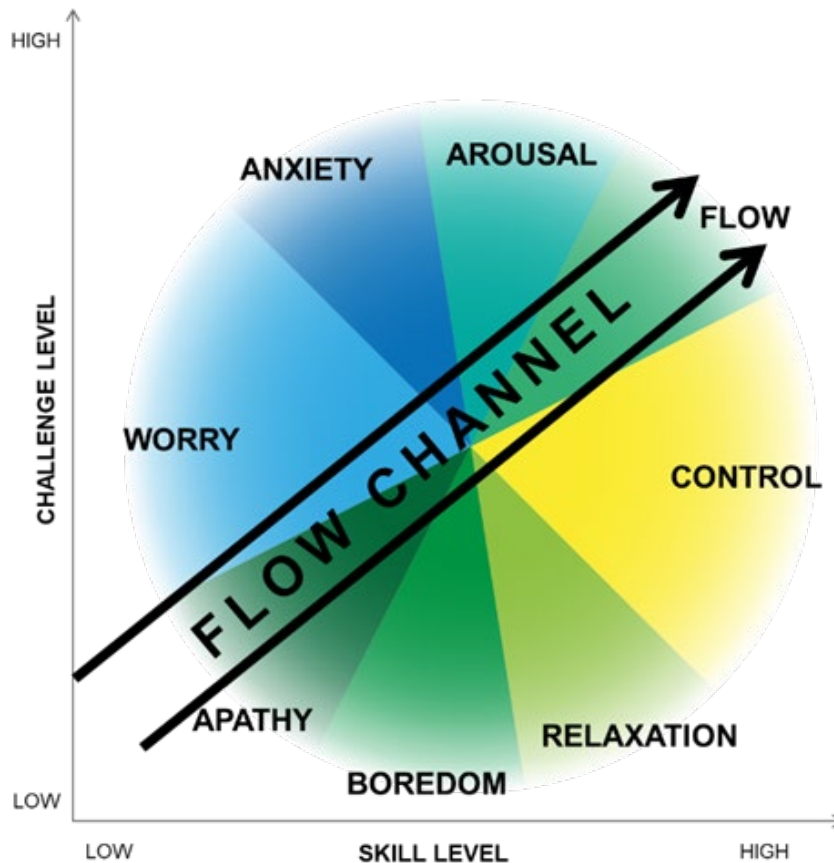
Afterwards we feel alive and satisfied, even if we are tired. From this, we can begin to understand how performance and wellbeing can go hand in hand.

Pursuing goals or completing projects or activities that are difficult and challenging yet still in line with our skills and competences enables us to easily enter this state.

Too many priorities, unclear goals or impossible deadlines increase our feelings of anxiety and worry. Tasks that are too “easy” for our skill level bore us or make us relax too much so we do not use our full potential. An organisation, and its bosses, that manages to work towards goals, encourage self-definition by collaborators, and develop their autonomy via leadership styles with greater emphasis on delegation and coaching, using their talents and strengths instead of boxing them into hard-and-fast roles can produce a greater level of flow/engagement, thereby tapping into the full intellectual, emotional and physical (in terms of fatigue resistance) potential of people to improve productivity and wellbeing.

7. Relationship

During such as unusual year, marked by lockdowns, remote working, fewer opportunities to meet, and social distancing, we have had the chance to experience first-hand just how important the absence of relationships can be: demotivation, apathy, frustration, and greater irritability are the emotions with which many of us have probably had to contend more often than usual during this period.



Nowadays we recognise the negative correlation between loneliness and longevity: while obesity reduces longevity by 20%, drinking by 30%, and smoking by 50%, loneliness reduces longevity by 70%. Apparently, loneliness can increase the probability of a stroke or coronary diseases, the leading cause of death in developed countries, by 30% (Pressman, et al). Conversely, feelings of social connection can strengthen our immune system, lengthen our lives, and lower the rates of anxiety and depression.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review (Seppälä & King, 2017) shows that there is a significant correlation between feeling lonely and burnout at work. Furthermore, a workplace setting in which we feel threatened and not valued with a relational dynamic with varying degrees of conflictuality can cause a sense of malaise, demotivation, and a drop in productivity and turnover.

On the other hand, positive relationships that make us feel valued, supported, respected, and safe increase psychological wellbeing, commitment, and performance. Feeling part of a group, sensing a positive atmosphere, and getting on well with colleagues actually enables us to be more trusting of ourselves and others, generating proactive behaviours and laying the foundations for effective cooperation.

Many studies in the field of neurosciences (Zak, 2017) also show that when we are in a positive relationship with somebody, our brain produces more **oxytocin** (better known as the love hormone and by women during labour) which encourages more

cooperation, creates trust, and helps to check the action of another hormone, testosterone, which pushes us to behave more elfishly and aggressively.

And given that **innovation** in a company – a crucial factor for the future of any business - is an essentially collaborative process, a company that promotes positive social relationships is working to not only make its employees feel better, but is also concretely contributing to its ability to renew itself and remain relevant in the market.

8. Meaning

In the 2003 film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* by Peter Weir, when Captain Jack Aubrey, “lucky” Jack (played by Russell Crowe), finally reaches the despised enemy French ship, he jumps aboard with his cutlass aloft shouting, “For England, for home, and for the prize!” Hearing this, the entire crew fiercely leaps into action as one man into the furious fray of the battle. The order of the words in the fateful sentence is anything but casual: he shouts *England* first because it symbolically sums up everything that unites them spiritually (the shared story, the Crown, and the religion); *home* comes second as it refers to their homeland where their ancestors are buried, and finally *the prize*, namely their monetary reward. Studies (Deci, 1996) have widely proven the role and the power of **intrinsic motivation** in achieving higher, sustainable levels of performance in the long term (when the material recompense is no longer enough to sustain energy and commitment).

The ability to give the activities, actions and projects that we undertake a wider and consistent meaning is one of the main ingredients in this type of motivation and fundamentally important for being able to generate stable, long-lasting levels of wellbeing. For a just cause we are willing to sacrifice ourselves, persevere, and even die or lose what we have.

When we work for or on something that has great value for us, we feel more alive and braver, financial reward slips into second place, and the proactive nature of finding solutions becomes second nature.

However, the purpose and broader meaning of things very often seem to be the great absentee in many roles in organisations, especially in jobs involving high levels of standardisation and repetitive actions, in which the only aim is to complete a series of tasks in order to keep the process itself functioning.

So, helping people to discover or build a meaning and a broader purpose in their work (perhaps even by changing it with job-crafting practices - Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Bakker, 2011) is the best way to draw on people’s intrinsic motivation and fuel a state of fulfilment and engagement that would also be able to reduce the awareness of frustration and exertion.

Building sense and meaning is a three-way job: everyone needs to look for a broader purpose to what they are doing; bosses can help people to see the bigger picture and the link with broader goals; the company can really consider and communicate the bigger contribution to the company to its people other than profits.

9. Accomplishment

It is easy to understand why we are not happy when we are goalless. We feel disorientated when we do not know clearly what is expected of us, we are demoralised when we cannot contribute to the building of a shared goal, and we feel less energised when we do not have personal goals. Conversely, an ambitious goal can bring out our drive and determination, making us feel alive; having a clear idea of where we are going fuels motivation, encourages us to aim for a goal, and generates gratification and wellbeing.

Giving it everything you've got to pursue challenging goals, getting out of your comfort zone and breaking with routine increases your energy levels, feeling of being in command of experiences, and self-confidence. If we test ourselves by doing something difficult and we succeed, we feel competent, capable and powerful; it makes us feel good. When asked the question, "Why should I improve? Why should I throw myself into a new challenge?", the most honest answer is that it generates intense satisfaction and helps to make us happy. The drive to not settle for second best, to want to improve, and fulfil our personal ambitions is part of human nature.

Work is the field of play on which we can express our ambitions; it is the place where people can have goals to pursue and celebrate their successes.

When we look at it from this angle, it clear to see how wellbeing is linked to performance and not just something else that we deal with only "after" work. A company can therefore improve its performance by improving the wellbeing of its people by using practices that encourage accomplishment: set clear, ambitious goals, and even delegate their definition to the person involved; guarantee an update about results (individual and company results); facilitate the growth of competences and new skills through both training and projects; implement MBO systems and incentives and value-adding systems that duly reward the results.

10. Vitality

Seligman's wellbeing model did not include vitality; this was added later by other authors and we have decided to use it here. Vitality refers to the level of energy, vigour and health with which we go about our lives. It touches on all the other elements in that it influences how we relate to others, our ability to focus, how we persevere when trying to achieve challenging goals, and how we feel positive emotions. Vitality influences our general perception of wellbeing; this is precisely why we use the phrase, "Mens sana in corpore sano" to underline the importance of physical wellbeing for our health and our mental wellbeing. The same capacity for resilience, which is so important nowadays and enables us to soldier on and keep persevering by adapting to adversities, seems to be more linked to endurance and energy which are recognised as vitality in this context.

Having the opportunity to recharge our batteries by successfully balancing our work lives with other activities (relaxation, fun or recreation depending on personal preferences) is absolutely essential, as the great deal of attention given to the subject

of having a work-life balance in recent years proves. Amongst the practices most closely linked to our ability to maintain a high level of vitality are undoubtedly: **exercise, nutrition and sleep**. Companies can help with this by providing gyms and adding healthy menus in their canteens, but they can also promote communication and awareness-raising campaigns about diets and the importance of sleep, and even implement practices that help people to change their habits and encourage exercise and physical activities for example.

Furthermore, extensive scientific research into the benefits of forms of meditation proves how the Latin phrase, “Mens sana in corpore sano” - “a healthy mind in a healthy body” - can work just as well the other way around, “a healthy body in a healthy mind”. Helping people to have better “control” over the mental aspect of their work plays a fundamental role in equipping them to tackle an increasingly more chaotic and uncertain world. Plus, it helps them to sleep better.

Many businesses have already “greenlighted” **mindfulness initiatives**, which provide an excellent opportunity for people to look after their mental and physical wellbeing. The subject of wellbeing is definitely not new and countless companies have already started to approach it, even if they refer to it with other similar terms. Many companies actually develop mindfulness programmes, “healthier” canteens” that can fulfil a host of different requests, gyms or membership programmes, crèches, and a variety of welfare programmes in general.

However, although this range may encompass valid and effective initiatives, they are often adopted rather disjointedly with little coordination between them and without a proper strategy to change the organisational behaviours that can undermine or, conversely, encourage the growth of wellbeing. The intention, and often the impact, is positive, but we believe that if we are to build environments and contexts of sustainable wellbeing and flourishing, we need to have a strategy guided by a reference model that helps to provide meaning and clarity about where and how to take action on a deeper generative level.

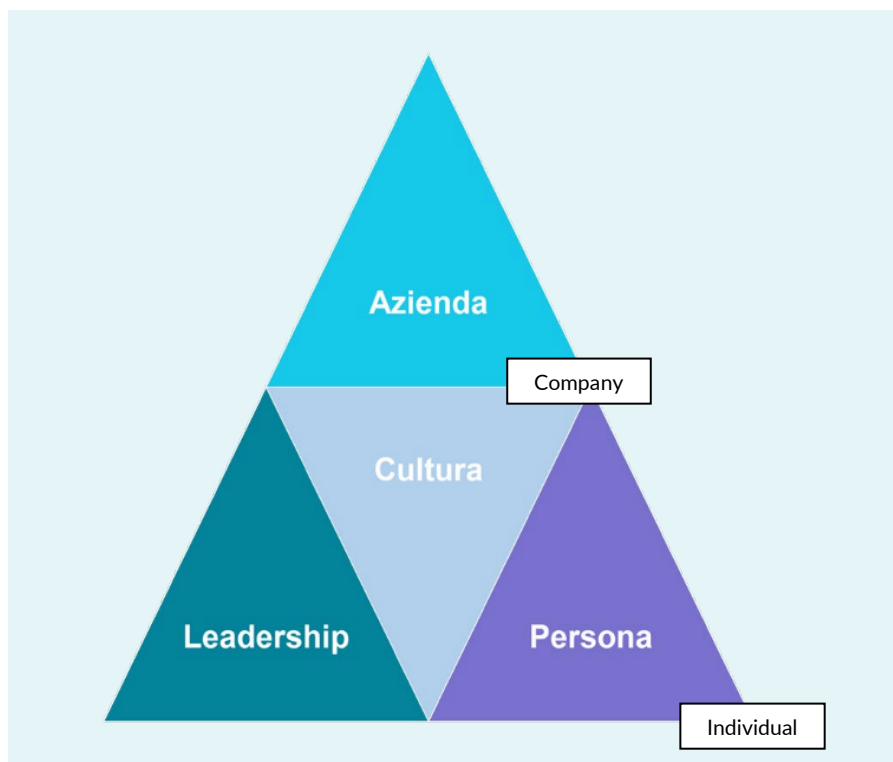
11. The Integrated Approach

From our point of view, taking an integrated approach to wellbeing means working on four dimensions.

- **The individual:** wellbeing is also and above all the responsibility of the individual, who can and must manage their own level of wellbeing by making informed choices without depending too much on changeable and uncontrollable external circumstances. It therefore becomes important to help people to develop a mindset and a skill set that will give them the support they need on their pursuit for wellbeing.
- **Leadership:** whether bosses like it or not, on some level they have a decisive impact on how contexts and situations at work are built in which people can express their potential and perform well with wellbeing. Helping them to understand that frustration, fear, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy do not

always help people to give the best of themselves is a path that needs to be taken as every serious effort is made to create better wellbeing.

- **The company:** processes and practices, and especially HR, can be re-examined in terms of wellbeing and flourishing. This does not mean making employees happy at any cost, instead it refers to strengthening and encouraging the variables (PERMA) that help the individual to feel good and “flourish” as a human being. Delegating more self-definition of goals, leaving employees free to choose their place of work, and providing more positive feedback and
- **The culture:** the real challenge of any wellbeing project or strategy obviously revolves around the cultural aspect, or rather around the set of assumptions, values and beliefs that steer collective behaviour and can facilitate or hinder an attempt to improve wellbeing. It is still a common belief (or cliché?) that a happy person feels less motivated to work hard or sacrifice themselves for the company cause, that in an office where people laugh and joke too much productivity is in danger, and that not being hunched over a computer in the workplace is a symptom of slacking off. Developing these beliefs is a compulsory step that must be taken if we are to embed the wellbeing and flourishing gene in an organisation’s DNA.



12. Where to Start?

The question we are most commonly asked is how and where do we start to develop a wellbeing strategy. There is no standard magic formula that can be applied to every situation because there are so many different initial situations, levels of sensitivity, and progress that has been made to date in each organisation. Gradation is, as in many things, a principle of wisdom as well as one of the key concepts of remote working. But over time we have identified three macro levels of action; they are quite separate yet very often integrated.

- **At a communicational level:** although we understand that knowledge alone does not necessarily cause people to change their behaviours, we are likewise aware that a complete lack of knowledge about a subject does not enable the development of awareness that can help to bring about change. It is often by inserting new constructs and **neologisms** into the language that we can enable a subject to take shape, gain traction and later catch people’s attention and generate a change. Up until less than ten years ago, subjects concerning D&I were pretty much absent from any discussions by boards of directors, in job interviews, and assessment and potential committees or round tables, but now we are starting to see some changes in attitudes and behaviours which are thanks in part to a different use of language. The same can be said about the subject of quality, which was introduced into the managerial language in Italy in the 1990s and is now seen as an essential subject in any given policy. Culture evolves through language, and language evolves through culture. We need to talk about, impart and share knowhow about wellbeing today, as we once did for D&I and quality, so that we can “naturally and clearly” practise wellbeing behaviours tomorrow.

Internal communications (both formal and informal) play a key role in this educational process for preparing the ground for more complex initiatives; they help people to see wellbeing as something positive and necessary within an organisation, as well as softening the cultural assumptions and beliefs that view people’s wellbeing as an opponent to their productivity and performance.

- **At a training level:** positive psychology has widely shown (Fredrickson, 2004) how striving for and maintaining our wellbeing is also a question of attitude (mindset) and personal skills. This means that it is important to equip people, leaders and managers with a set of skills that help to self-generate higher levels of wellbeing and contribute to building contexts in which it is easier to experience wellbeing. Companies have been running training courses for years that help people to communicate better, manage conflict more adeptly, and coordinate and engage with their team more effectively. Having a wellbeing model underlying your training strategy helps to define training and extend it to also cover other subjects, such as positive emotions or meaning, which are often sorely lacking in most parts of an organisation. And we can take this further.

The training itself needs to focus much more on building new ways of transferring straightforward knowledge and competences. In addition to devising attractive, interesting and engaging courses (or web training), above all we need to design learning experiences that place more value on learnings rooted in neurosciences and behavioural science.

- **At a transformative level:** the third level tackles change management and the development of new organisational behaviours, initially in small groups and then later on a larger scale, which we call adoption. This is the most structured approach; it encompasses (and is supported by) the previous two levels.

Taking action on a transformative level means firstly getting people to think about the organisation and three main themes (this begins with the top management before being expanding to a larger number of people).

- *Objectives and KPIs:* what are the wellbeing objectives that the company wants to achieve and how will it know when it has succeeded? What will we use to gauge progress? Where are we now?
- *Behaviours:* change can only come with a change in people's behaviours and habits. What are the key wellbeing and flourishing behaviours that we can start to practise or practise more frequently?
- *Beliefs and bias:* what are the cultural assumptions and beliefs that could hinder the development of greater wellbeing and flourishing? How can we generate new beliefs that will enable us to have more choices and behaviours leading to wellbeing? Once these elements have been identified, work can begin to plan and design initiatives for the four previously described areas, and define or redefine processes, practices and actions that encourage the development of greater wellbeing and flourishing (human and material).

13. Conclusions and Emerging Issues

Wellbeing is undoubtedly fundamentally important to society and businesses. The current health situation has placed the question of people's health at the heart of day-to-day discussions, albeit on a different level. The deaths, suffering and hardship associated with the pandemic, and the urgency to deal with them, have brought about the reawakening of a general awareness, a renewed sensitivity to people's wellbeing. Although a good thing, it has been attenuated by the effects of the pandemic and also the lifestyle that could cause many more victims.

In line with this scenario, society as a whole, encouraged by the United Nations, is heading in the direction of sustainable development aimed at promoting the protection of people's health and safety as well as their growth and enhanced value. Each of us now has the opportunity, with varying degrees of responsibility and ability, to have an impact on our own wellbeing and that of others and develop our potential. And those with a leadership or management role in companies are amongst

the first who can contribute to this collective project, while also embodying the key to the wellbeing and longevity of their company and business.

So, the role of HR now gains new meaning, a new mission, and fresh purpose. People working in human resources now have the chance to contribute to a major transformation, creating contexts in the workplace in which the wellbeing and flourishing of individuals are in lockstep with those of the organisation. Enabling wellbeing and flourishing is the new sustainable HR platform for the post-COVID era.

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Notes

¹ The *V* was not part of the original model, but the literature now considers this variable to be an essential element for wellbeing.