



High-trust Workplaces Promote Employee Well-being

DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT FROM LEADERS IS NEEDED TO MAKE THIS A PART OF AN ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE

By Graham Lowe, PhD

Great workplaces aren't defined by eye-popping perks, pay and benefits. Rather, what these workplaces have in common is a culture of trust. Great Place to Work Institute (GPTW) has set the standard for defining and measuring what it means to be a high-trust workplace. A key insight from GPTW's research is that trust-based cultures not only drive superior business performance, they also foster employee well-being.

This connection between trust and well-being deserves closer scrutiny, given that more employers are trying to move beyond traditional occupational health, safety and wellness by embracing the more holistic concept of employee well-being.

LINKING TRUST AND WELL-BEING

According to the International Labour Organization, well-being includes, "all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization."

Employers can improve employee well-being by taking an integrated and comprehensive approach to promoting physical,

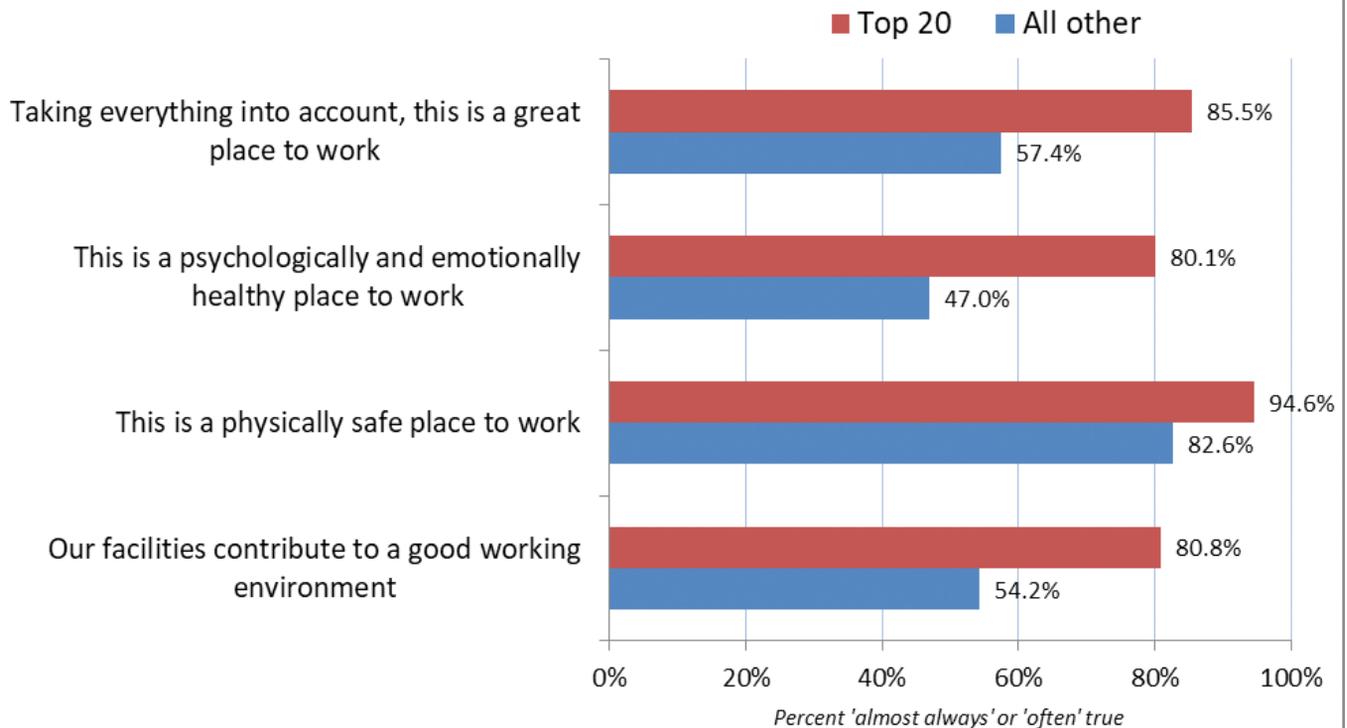
psychological and emotional health and safety. Most critical is demonstrated commitment from leaders to improve employee well-being and embedding this goal into the organization's culture.

GPTW's research shows how this happens. Employees trust managers who are concerned about their well-being. Trustworthy managers listen and respond to employee input and are open and honest about change. Strong core values – such as fairness, respect and integrity – positively guide day-to-day interactions among co-workers, between managers and employees, and between employees and their customers or clients, suppliers, business partners and the larger community. Employees take pride in their work and feel a true sense of camaraderie with co-workers. The synergy between trust, pride and camaraderie inspires collaboration, creativity and innovation. As a result, employees flourish and their overall work experiences are positive.

ASSESSING WELL-BEING

That's because a high-trust culture promotes psychological well-being, which is a central goal of the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (the

Figure 1: Key well-being indicators, comparing top 20 Best Workplaces in Canada with all other organizations surveyed by GPTW Canada in 2017-18



(c) Great Place to Work Institute Canada. Based on 201 organizations with 48,281 employees surveyed by GPTW Canada in 2017-18. This chart compares the top 20 organizations with all others, based on total average Trust Index scores (average of 58 items in the survey). All group differences statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Standard). Launched in 2013 as a joint initiative of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, Canadian Standards Association and the Bureau de normalisation du Québec, the voluntary Standard has encouraged more Canadian employers to address [workplace mental health issues](#).

A better understanding of the connection between trust and psychological well-being can be obtained by analyzing GPTW survey data using the Standard's framework of workplace psychological health and safety.

At the core of GPTW's methodology is its Trust Model. The model is the basis for its Trust Index Survey, an assessment tool used annually by thousands of organizations in over 90 countries. Survey results are used to produce the U.S. list of 100 Best Companies to Work For, published in *Fortune* and the Canadian list of Best Workplaces, published in the *Globe and Mail*. Great workplaces invest in their people knowing this creates competitive advantage.

Great Place to Work Institute Canada provided data from 48,281 respondents in 201 Canadian organizations it surveyed with the Trust Index in 2017 and 2018. Detailed analysis of these data confirms that investing in people above all else means promoting their psychological well-being. Trust Index Survey results shed new light on the organic connection between a high-trust culture, on one hand, and employee well-being, on the other.

HOW HEALTHY AND SAFE ARE GREAT WORKPLACES?

GPTW's Trust Index Survey asks respondents to rate how true the following statement is: "This is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work."

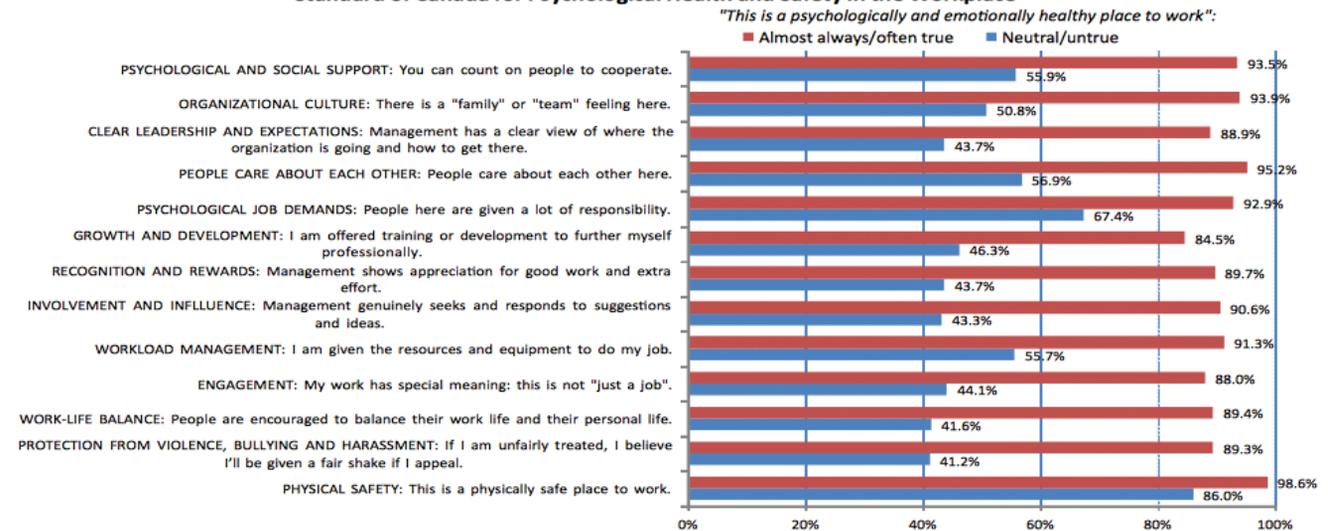
This single question provides a global indicator of whether or not a workplace promotes employees' psychological well-being.

Workplaces with the highest trust levels are experienced as psychologically and emotionally healthy. This becomes clear when comparing the top 20 organizations (or top 10 per cent) surveyed by GPTW during 2017-18, based on their overall Trust Index score, with the other 181 organizations the Institute surveyed. Four out of five employees in a high-trust workplace consider it to be a psychologically and emotionally healthy workplace (see Figure 1). This compares with fewer than half in all the other organizations GPTW surveyed. Essentially, a psychologically and emotionally healthy workplace is a "great place to work."

Also relevant is that four out of five employees in the top 20 organizations examined in Figure 1 believe that their employers' facilities contribute to a good working environment, far more than employees in organizations with lower trust levels. Almost all (95 per cent) of the employees in the top 20 organizations consider their workplaces safe.

Interestingly, physical safety also is positively rated (83 per cent) in all the other organizations surveyed by GPTW. This

Figure 2: Characteristics of a psychologically and emotionally healthy workplace based on the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace



(c) Great Place to Work Institute Canada. Based on 201 organizations with 48,281 employees surveyed by GPTW Canada in 2017-18. This chart compares 2 groups of respondents: those answering 'almost always true' and 'often true' with those who answered 'sometimes true/sometimes untrue', 'often untrue', and 'almost always untrue'. All group differences statistically significant ($p < .001$)

likely reflects the successful efforts by many Canadian employers to reduce lost-time work injuries and the decline of physically demanding jobs. Even so, employees in lower-trust organizations consider their workplaces somewhat less safe.

WORKPLACE INFLUENCES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The Standard identifies 13 specific [workplace characteristics](#) that can either enhance or diminish the psychological well-being of workers:

1. Psychological and social support
2. Organizational culture
3. Clear leadership and expectations
4. Civility and respect
5. Psychological job demands
6. Growth and development
7. Recognition and rewards
8. Involvement and influence
9. Workload management
10. Engagement
11. Work-life balance
12. Protection from violence, bullying and harassment
13. Physical safety.

The Trust Index Survey sheds new light on the relationship between these 13 workplace factors and employees' perceptions of the psychological health of their work environment. The results in Figure 2 are striking.

Around 90 per cent of employees who rate their workplace as psychologically and emotionally healthy also give very positive assessments of all 13 factors in the Standard. In contrast, the same is true for only about half of survey respondents who give neutral or negative assessments of their workplace as psychologically and emotionally healthy.

TRUSTWORTHY MANAGERS LISTEN AND RESPOND TO EMPLOYEE INPUT AND ARE OPEN AND HONEST ABOUT CHANGE.

The one exception is physical safety. As already noted, this should not be surprising. However, the new insight in Figure 2 is that the most psychologically healthy workplaces also are highly rated to be physically safe.

ACTION IMPLICATIONS

For employers, the practical implications here are three-fold:

1. Employees won't experience their work environment as a "great place to work" unless it is both physically and psychologically healthy.
2. The Standard's 13 workplace factors are not only essential for promoting employee psychological well-being, they also define a great place to work.
3. The reason a great workplace is synonymous with psychological well-being comes down to one word: trust.

Workplace health and safety experts advocate creating a "culture of health" and a "safety culture" as building blocks for a healthy organization. Achieving these goals can only happen in a climate of trust. Employees and managers must trust one another and managers must take employees' best interests into account in what they say and do. In short, all workplace relationships must rest on a foundation of trust in order for the work environment to be truly healthy, safe and productive. Let this be a guiding principle for any employer planning to implement the Standard. ■

Graham Lowe, PhD, is president of The Graham Lowe Group Inc.