

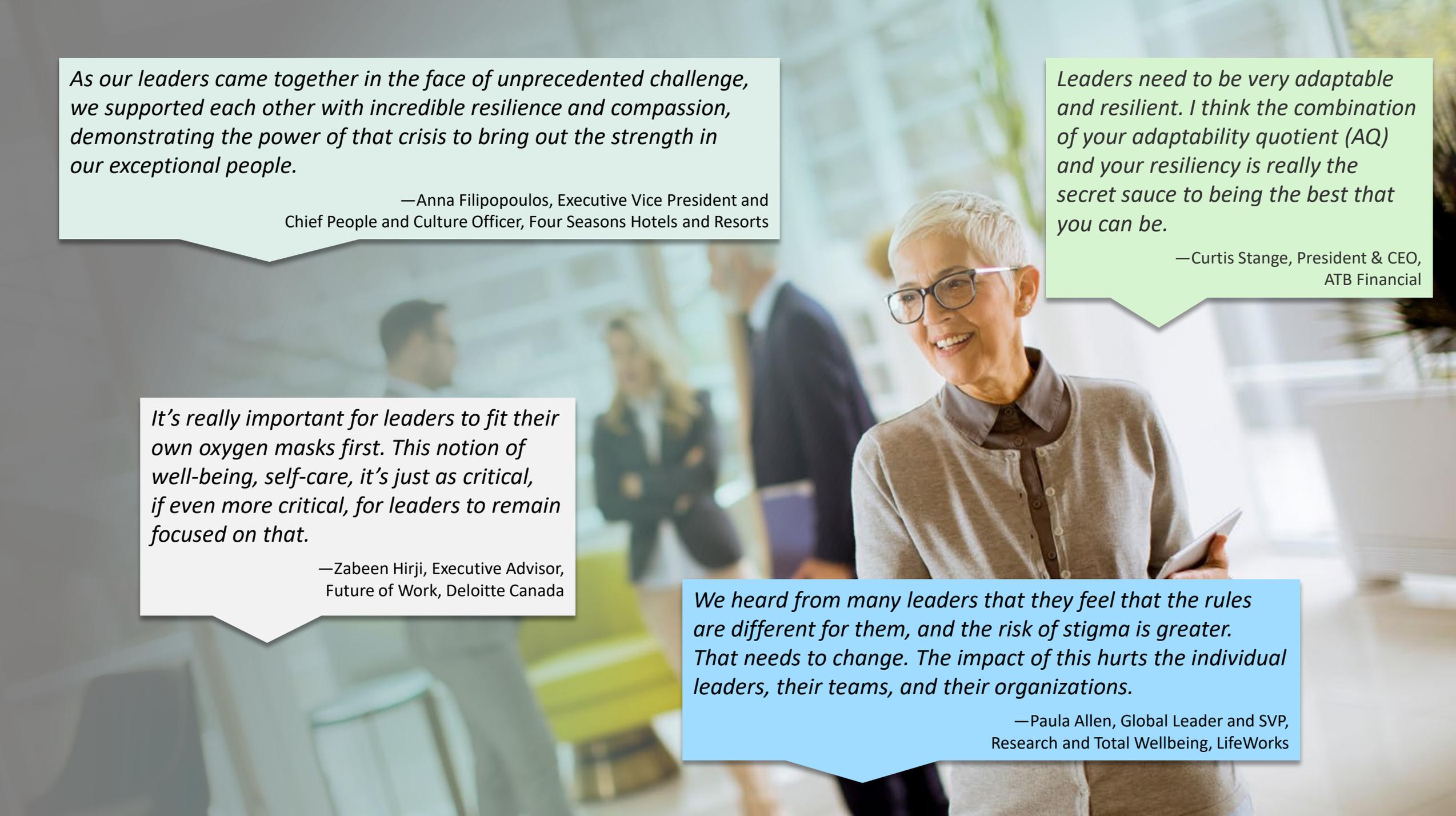


Inspiring insights

Well-being and resilience in senior leaders

A playbook for action

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As our leaders came together in the face of unprecedented challenge, we supported each other with incredible resilience and compassion, demonstrating the power of that crisis to bring out the strength in our exceptional people.

—Anna Filipopoulos, Executive Vice President and Chief People and Culture Officer, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

Leaders need to be very adaptable and resilient. I think the combination of your adaptability quotient (AQ) and your resiliency is really the secret sauce to being the best that you can be.

—Curtis Stange, President & CEO, ATB Financial

It's really important for leaders to fit their own oxygen masks first. This notion of well-being, self-care, it's just as critical, if even more critical, for leaders to remain focused on that.

—Zabeen Hirji, Executive Advisor, Future of Work, Deloitte Canada

We heard from many leaders that they feel that the rules are different for them, and the risk of stigma is greater. That needs to change. The impact of this hurts the individual leaders, their teams, and their organizations.

—Paula Allen, Global Leader and SVP, Research and Total Wellbeing, LifeWorks

Leaders frequently experience heightened levels of stress, which has only been magnified by the pandemic. This needs to be addressed, especially as leaders with seniority, such as those in the C-suite, often feel unable to reach out for help. To assess the full impact of the pandemic on the well-being of senior leaders, Deloitte Canada and the LifeWorks Research Group conducted research in the spring of 2021 and released a study on what we discovered: *Well-being and resilience in senior leaders*. We gauged the mental health of senior leaders and, perhaps unsurprisingly, found that they were under extraordinary strain, with **82% reporting experiencing exhaustion**. A full 50% of leaders with seniority also **contemplated exiting their roles, resigning, retiring, taking a leave of absence, or moving to part-time work**.¹

What can boards and executive teams do to improve well-being, retain senior leaders, and ensure they thrive through the inevitable challenges ahead? This playbook for action provides some recommendations and answers to this question.

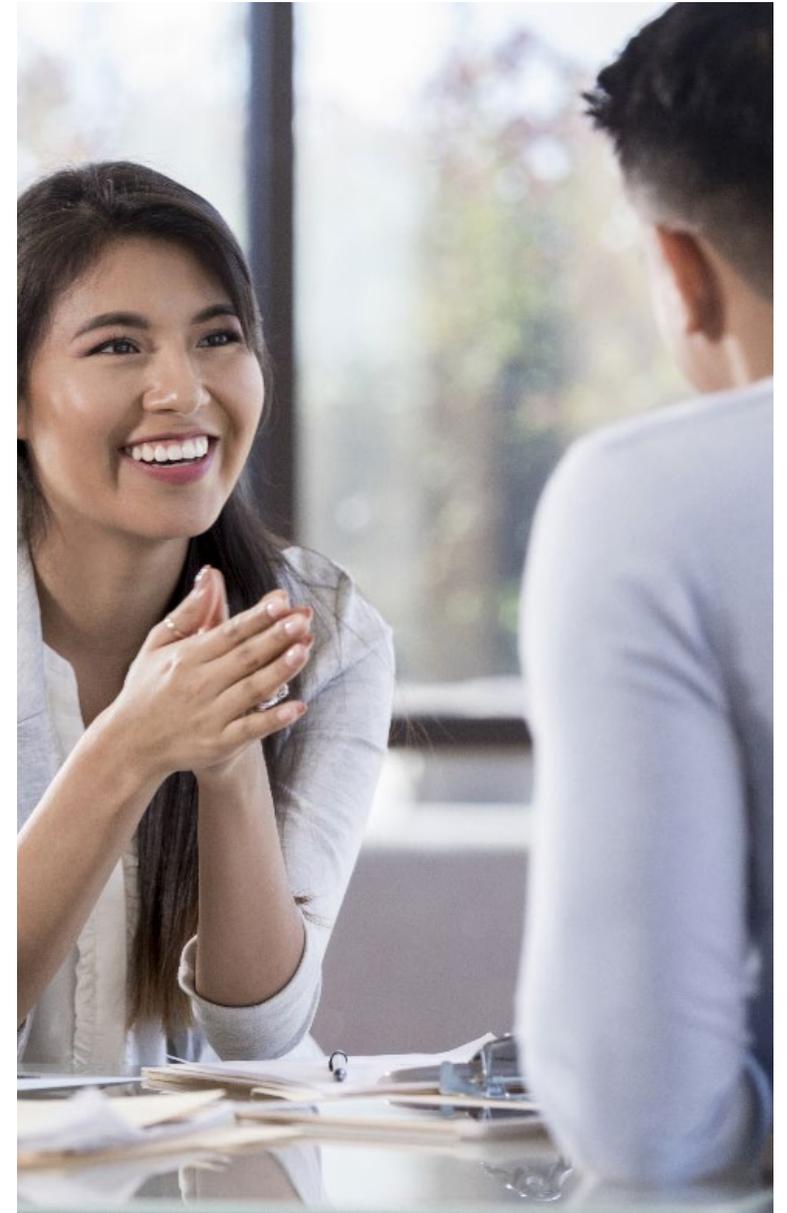
With our recent findings top of mind, we created a working group of human resources leaders to discuss practical actions that could meaningfully improve the well-being and resilience of senior leaders. The participants' input about their experiences, combined with Deloitte Canada and LifeWorks' knowledge and experience, informed this playbook and our recommendations for mitigating burnout risk and helping senior leaders to thrive, lead at their optimal level, and build up their resilience, today and into the future.

The first step is to **understand the challenges senior leaders face** (needs, barriers, and opportunities with respect to well-being and ways of working) and **articulate a case for change** that explains why investing in their mental health and well-being should be a top priority. Beyond this, our overall recommendations target four key action areas relating to leadership, company culture, and work practices:

1. **Reduce stigma regarding mental health** by demystifying and normalizing dialogue among top executives and other senior leaders.
2. **Strengthen peer relationships** to create a sense of community, support, and collaboration.
3. **Enhance organizational mental health and well-being support** to ensure appropriate resources and tools are available.
4. **Rethink work** to enable leaders to work effectively and efficiently, thereby reducing work efforts and stress and freeing up time to rest and disconnect.

Well-being is a critical topic and should be an organizational imperative. Leaders with seniority set the tone for their organizations. Ensuring they receive the required support to thrive in their roles, lead their teams, and ultimately create and maintain resilient organizations is the right thing to do—and it makes business sense.

Our initial research included nearly 1,200 senior leaders from 11 private and public sector organizations, many with global operations. Read more results from the study [here](#). Interviews with CHROs and a CEO were also conducted to gather their insights; find the links to their videos on page 11.



Key learnings from the *Well-being and resilience in senior leaders* study

Our research informed the four key action areas in this playbook for action

While business is, at its core, ever-changing, the pandemic-related acceleration of this evolution is showing no signs of slowing down. This indicates that the resilience, adaptability, and capabilities of senior leaders will continually be tested and should be continually strengthened.

If senior leaders are not encouraged to focus on their own well-being first, they will be unable to properly focus on the well-being of their teams and ultimately ensure their organizations have the resilience and energy to overcome future challenges. The *Well-being and resilience in senior leaders* study shows that organizations still have a lot of work to do to fully equip their leaders when it comes to well-being.



1. Reduce stigma regarding mental health

41%

indicated self-stigma about even the idea of acknowledging or accepting potential mental health challenges

55%

reported concern about workplace stigma having an impact on their careers

3. Enhance mental health and well-being support

82%

reported exhaustion—an indicator of burnout risk

96%

of those who reported exhaustion also noted a decline in their mental health

2. Strengthen peer relationships

65%

of those reporting worsened peer relationships also reported worsened mental health

59%

reported that work peers are helpful in supporting resilience

4. Rethink work

63%

of senior leaders do not make time for their personal well-being

68%

noted that their top stressor was the increase in work volume compared to pre-pandemic levels

Executives and boards can use our recommendations to help integrate well-being into the fabric of their organizations, identify gaps that need to be addressed, and take practical actions to improve well-being and resilience. You can find more results from the *Well-being and resilience in senior leaders* study [here](#).

Reduce stigma regarding mental health

Stigma creates unsafe spaces for expressing vulnerability about mental health challenges. It can limit senior leaders from bringing their whole selves to work, which can then cascade throughout their organizations. Fortunately, reducing the stigma not only allows these leaders to show up authentically, but also helps create a more inclusive and caring workplace. The key is building psychological safety, defined by Amy Edmondson as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking,” such that employees need not fear negative consequences to their reputations or careers if they are open to being authentic and overt about being mentally unwell.² Reducing stigma at the highest levels of an organization helps build psychological safety, impacting how senior leaders show up and how they are perceived by the people they interact with.

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, a chair established to support the study of human interactions that lead to the creation of successful enterprises that contribute to the betterment of society.

She is the author of seven books and over 60 scholarly papers, published in academic and management outlets, such as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Harvard Business Review*. She is also a sought-after keynote speaker with a worldwide following.²

Research on why this action area matters

Stigma deters people from revealing mental health issues to their colleagues and friends, indicating a psychologically unsafe environment.³ Feeling psychologically safe is essential for building an inclusive culture, driving employee well-being, and improving their work experience.⁴ In a recent survey, 57% of company leaders indicated that they highly value psychological safety—and ranked it as one of the most valuable factors for creating a safe work environment.⁵ Other research shows that it can also drive innovation, improve decision-making, and help organizations retain top talent.⁶

While our research did not specifically address substance abuse and addiction, this is another prevalent issue among leaders that is often stigmatized.⁷ Consider openly discussing this mental health topic as part of the recommendations below to support and benefit a key leader population. We strongly recommend reaching out to a health care professional for direction and reading additional resources on the topic.

How organizations can address this issue

Short-term recommendations

#1: Uncover what is driving stigma about mental health among senior leaders using confidential surveys and interviews.

Ask pointed questions to understand the reinforcers of stigma and unravel root causes that might be limiting psychological safety.

#2: Invest in mental health training for senior leaders, including how to identify it in themselves and in their teams.

#3: Normalize mental health discussions by encouraging senior leaders to share their experiences. Ask well-known leaders to more broadly share their experiences with personal challenges or mental well-being to normalize the topic. Role-modelling at the executive level will boost this effort, especially where the CEO is leading this effort from the front.

Longer-term recommendations

#1: Incorporate questions about psychological safety into surveys, especially those related to engagement, inclusion, and well-being.

- Baseline employee perceptions about the degree to which senior leaders foster psychological safety.
- Based on employee perceptions, identify areas for improvement and flag for leaders to address in annual plans.
- Design supports that enable leaders to create a psychologically safe and inclusive environment (e.g., make inclusion training mandatory and leverage the six signature traits of inclusive leadership⁸).

#2: Tie psychological safety into leaders’ and organization-wide KPIs to ensure they are prioritizing their own and their team’s well-being. This formally flags well-being as an organizational priority for the leadership team. Collect data to track these indicators over time.

Strengthen peer relationships

Peer-to-peer relationships are important for well-being and productivity at all levels, particularly in turbulent times, offering both support and business value. Companies benefit by fostering good collaborative relationships among senior leaders, rather than a competitive environment focused only on personal achievements. Strong peer relationships also create much-needed interpersonal connections for senior leaders, with space for informal dialogue and a built-in support network where people look out for one another.

When surveyed, 59% of senior leaders reported that work peers are helpful in supporting resilience.⁹ Those who have a strong friendship at work are reportedly seven times as likely to be engaged in their jobs.¹⁰ While social connections are important for everyone, having trusted peers in challenging times is invaluable for senior leadership. Leaders can also strive to a strong and supportive network on their own, in addition to programs and initiatives within their organizations.



Research on why this action area matters

Social interactions at work have been found to increase self-reported positive feelings, satisfaction, and attachment to the organization, in addition to well-being and employee engagement. The benefits of social interactions lead to improved performance outcomes and lower business costs, staff turnover, and absenteeism.¹¹ Solid relationships with peers also support overall resilience.¹² The sense of belonging at work, however, has declined since pre-pandemic times.¹³ Moreover, social connections and productivity are closely linked—those who felt satisfied with their level of peer connections throughout the pandemic were 3.2 times more likely to have maintained or improved their productivity.¹⁴ The Institute for Corporate Productivity found that the most impactful employee well-being measure in high-performing organizations is participation in social activities and community programs.¹⁵

How organizations can address this issue

Short-term recommendations

#1: Create intentional opportunities for senior leaders to come together in person. As restrictions lift and people return to the office, make space for in-person connections to facilitate deeper personal connections. This is particularly important for team members who joined the organization during the pandemic, so create opportunities for them to meet other leaders with seniority to develop connections and a support network.

#2: Emphasize the importance of peer relationships. Consider simple actions such as emphasizing the importance of connection on internal communication channels, through the C-suite’s stories, and by asking people who have recently joined the organization to share how new relationships impacted their transition. Create space for informal support among senior leaders wherever possible—meetings, casual interactions, etc.—to help foster natural connections.

Longer-term recommendations

#1: Identify barriers to the development of peer-to-peer relationships. Ask and answer key questions such as “How might leaders make time and opportunities for peer engagement?” and “How might leaders use collaborative tools to foster desired behaviours?” Pinpoint areas where negative competition might exist and develop a plan to overcome all possible barriers.

#2: Design and offer programs for peer forums. Create programs that bring senior leaders together in small pods or forums. That way, leaders have a built-in sounding board for key decisions and space to work through challenges, share and hear different viewpoints, crystalize priorities, and make decisions more confidently. Peer forums should ultimately be self-directed, with leaders shaping the agenda based on their own needs. Pods can be created internally or offered through external forums.

#3: Measure executives on the degree to which they support other leaders’ well-being. Incorporate collaboration and peer support (helping other leaders enhance their well-being) into leadership models and performance expectations and measurements.

Enhance mental health and well-being support

To be at the top of their game, senior leaders need energy and optimism when it comes to their work. The opposite is what leads to burnout—exhaustion, negativity about one’s work, and lowered efficacy.* Stress and change within and beyond an organization are inevitable but put a strain on mental capacity and the resiliency to prevail over challenging circumstances. Without the right support in place to help leaders address and overcome challenges, organizations are putting their people and strategy in jeopardy. Enhancing mental health and well-being support to combat the factors that lead to burnout can also create sustained performance over time.

Research on why this action area matters

Deloitte Canada analyzed the experiences of seven Canadian organizations in the report, *The ROI in workplace mental health programs: Good for people, good for business*, which found that programs supporting employees across the entire spectrum of mental health—including the promotion of well-being intervention methods, care, and mitigating risk factors—are more likely to achieve positive ROI. In fact, the median annual ROI was \$1.62, and up to \$2.18, for each dollar spent by the organizations that had programs in place for more than three years, highlighting that mental health programs provide a greater return over time.¹⁶

In one survey of software engineers, 92% indicated that they “would be more likely to stay with their job if their bosses showed more empathy.”¹⁷ Leaders who manage employees with empathy see 21% higher productivity on average.¹⁸ More and more data is being gathered that points to the fact that improved mental health leads to better leaders and better business outcomes.

*As defined by the World Health Organization, “Burn-out is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativity or cynicism related to one’s job; and
- Reduced professional efficacy.”²⁰

How organizations can address this issue

Short-term recommendations

#1: Promote program usage proactively through storytelling by leaders. High performers often avoid seeking help before they burn out and seeing other leaders share their human experiences can have a big impact. Find creative ways to promote participation in programs, leveraging internal channels and role-modelling by executives.

#2: Ensure existing services are easy to access. Start with easily accessible webpages that list all the mental health services offered by the organization and how to access them. Showcase specific programs targeted at senior-level leaders in key forums to foster widespread adoption.

#3: Train leaders to recognize the early signs of burnout in themselves and the actions they can take. Provide training that normalizes and explains the indicators of burnout and share channels where senior leaders can access support from mental health professionals.

#4: Complete an organizational self-assessment questionnaire to determine where your policies and practices stand relative to a workplace mental health maturity model, such as the one found on [WSI-MH.com](https://www.wsi-mh.com).¹⁹

Longer-term recommendations

#1: Offer resilience training for senior leaders. Identify programs that help leaders develop mental resilience and coping skills to help them thrive despite periods of stress. Consider those with externally trained facilitators that could be embedded in executive development programs.

#2: Conduct individual mental health assessments. Have senior leaders perform a confidential assessment to reflect on their own well-being, to identify the resources that would be best suited to their needs, and to inform a plan to drive their mental well-being. Offer a health coach to assist with tailoring these plans and answer senior leaders’ questions. Conduct individual interviews and digital focus groups where people can remain anonymous and participate asynchronously (on their own schedules).

#3: Consider offering a leave/sabbatical program. Provide senior leaders with the opportunity to take a substantial time away from work—to recharge, recalibrate on their intentions, engage in volunteerism, and come back to work refreshed. Normalize these programs by having leaders share their experiences and insights.

Rethink work

It's essential for companies to recognize that increasing workloads and work complexity without rethinking work (e.g., how work is done, who does it, and how it is prioritized) can lead to burnout. Instead of trying to do it all, senior leaders should have the freedom to determine the most important areas of work and focus. By prioritizing their own work and developing manageable workloads, they will be empowered to disconnect and recharge, and set that important example for their teams. Establishing their own boundaries for work to support their own well-being helps to foster a positive culture that benefits the organization and everyone in it.

Research on why this action area matters

New programs and ways of working are being explored, particularly in response to the longer hours and increased workloads seen during the pandemic. This has led to an increase in stress—according to our survey, the top stressor for senior leaders (68%) during the pandemic was the increase in work volume.²¹ There are better ways of getting work done and a clear need to both rationalize and prioritize initiatives, not only due to stress and its negative implications, but also in consideration of the additional time senior leaders who are heading back to the office need for commuting to work again.

To clear low-value tasks from their agendas, automation options should be prioritized to alleviate workloads and encourage well-being. The value of true flexibility in terms of working hours, location, etc. also needs to be genuinely recognized across the organization and not assumed for senior leaders, as this will only sustain the pseudo-flexibility that some leaders have.²²



How organizations can address this issue

Short-term recommendations

#1: Establish a team pledge that promotes well-being, led by and including senior leaders. As a team, members identify what they need to bring their best selves to work and share tips for balancing workloads. This provides an opportunity for senior leaders to express their needs and set the tone for setting boundaries and expressing vulnerability. They can also incorporate ways to empower their team to make choices for themselves and reduce review cycles with senior leaders.

#2: Encourage senior leaders to develop personal working and well-being norms. Designate dedicated time to recharge and set realistic priorities and personal boundaries around time spent on well-being to foster resiliency in turbulent times.

#3: Adjust meeting culture to reduce overall time spent in meetings and allow more time to focus on deep work by limiting the number of attendees, shortening the duration, and implementing meeting-free, focused work time.

#4: Train leaders on collaboration tools and migrate activity to these tools. Through training and habit development, ensure senior leaders are using digital tools to communicate and work to save them both time and effort.

Longer-term recommendations

#1: Evaluate organization-wide strategic priorities to establish realistic expectations and timelines for initiatives considered to be of the highest priority. This organization-wide alignment on the work that is most essential will help senior leaders balance their workloads and focus on critical priorities. It also requires leaders to act as enterprise leaders rather than focusing solely on their own business or function.

#2: Accelerate automation capabilities. Automate administrative and low-value tasks to eliminate them from senior leaders' workloads so they can focus on more valuable, meaningful work.

#3: Demonstrate flexibility on locations and times for work. Encourage senior leaders to show up and demonstrate what working flexibly means. Allow the same for their teams, with a flexible or hybrid model that accommodates both work and life.

A call to action

Make senior leader well-being a board and senior executive priority

Although the construct of well-being among senior-level leaders may seem abstract, adopting new behaviours to build well-being into work is key to fostering a resilient organization that can thrive through difficult circumstances and the ever-changing environment they operate in. While there is no one path to well-being and resilience, organizations can make meaningful progress by adopting this practical framework for action to the benefit of their senior leaders and the organization at large.

There are consequences for organizations when leaders are unable to sustain their own well-being and resiliency amid uncertainty and change. We are seeing it now. Our research indicates that senior leaders feel depleted from the impact of the pandemic, and that will keep happening in times of difficulty if they are not sufficiently supported in less stressful times. It is not only the right thing to do, but it's also a business imperative. The costs associated with poor mental health have skyrocketed, with the World Health Organizations estimating it to cause US\$1 trillion per year in lost productivity.^{23,24} By highlighting well-being and resiliency—and prompting important discussions and decisive action in many organizations—the pandemic has propelled progress toward making senior leader well-being a strategic priority.

As outlined in this report, we recommend focusing on four key actions to improve support for the mental health and well-being of leaders:

1. Create opportunities for courageous conversations about personal experiences among top executives and other senior leaders to reduce stigma surrounding mental health.
2. Strengthen collaboration and create a sense of belonging by fostering peer relationships.
3. Elevate existing organizational mental health and well-being support systems to ensure senior leaders' needs are being met.
4. Rethink and redesign work to create space for leaders to focus on higher-value outcomes and make time for self-care.

It is critical to take targeted action on this priority and to acknowledge that frequent and consistent re-evaluations and iterations will be required to build senior leader well-being and resiliency—an ongoing and necessary journey that will build organizational resiliency and sustain organizations over time.



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Endnotes

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Video interviews with senior leaders (only in English)

- [Helena Gottschling, Chief Human Resources Officer at RBC](#)
- [Beth Tyndall, Chief People Officer at Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan](#)
- [Omo Akintan, Chief People Officer at City of Toronto](#)
- [Mona Malone, Chief Human Resources Officer and Head of People & Culture at BMO](#)
- [Kelly Hannah-Moffatt, Vice President of People Strategy, Equity and Culture at University of Toronto](#)
- [Karli Farrow, President and CEO at Trillium Health Partners](#)



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