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Work-Life Bloom

How to Nurture a Team that Flourishes

Dan Pontefract • Figure 1 Publishing © 2023 • 256 pages

Life Advice / Work-Life-Balance

Take-Aways

- If you want to increase performance, give employees empathy and support.
- Think like a gardener to help your employees “bloom,” both at work and in their personal lives.
- Prioritize six improvements to help employees thrive at work.
- Support six life factors that will help team members be their best selves.
- Assess which of the four garden phases your team members are experiencing and tailor your support accordingly.
- Conduct “soil tests”: Converse with team members to determine areas where they’re struggling.
- Conduct “water tests”: Assess your own performance.
- Even self-aware leaders won’t always be in bloom. Navigate setbacks without losing hope.

Recommendation

Many employees aren't happy in their roles – in fact, research shows that being at work adversely affects many workers' mental health. The responsibility for changing this dynamic lies with leadership, best-selling author and leadership expert Dan Pontefract argues. He calls on leaders to learn how to support team members' well-being – at work and in their personal lives – so they can achieve their full potential. Using the metaphor of a garden, Pontefract guides leaders in how to manage the factors that harm work performance and create the conditions required for teams to flourish.

Summary

If you want to increase performance, give employees empathy and support.

For many employees, going to work triggers negative feelings, ranging from low-grade anxiety to outright misery. According to Gallup's 2022 State of the Global Workforce Report, 60% of people feel emotionally detached when working, and 19% report feeling miserable at work. A LinkedIn-commissioned survey found that 80% of employed adults regularly feel anxious on Sundays – anticipating their coming work week. One study by UK Researchers Alex Bryson and George MacKerron discovered that paid work drains most people of joy to a degree only surpassed by the experience of being bedridden with an illness.

“Leaders are not wholly accountable for their team members’ overarching welfare. But you can most definitely create conditions that give someone the opportunity to bloom or not and to burn out or not.”

Leaders often contribute to employee unhappiness: People who work under the watchful eye of their bosses report feeling less happy than those who work alongside peers. But leaders can also take steps to reverse their people's negative feelings about work. Leaders improve employee well-being and boost performance levels by creating work environments where people feel supported and safe, which allows them to be their most authentic selves. Instead of pressuring team members to bring the “best versions” of themselves to the workplace, ask yourself how you can better support workers – both at work and in their personal lives – and, in doing so, bring out the best in them.

Think like a gardener to help your employees “bloom,” both at work and in their personal lives.

Stop focusing on creating a “work-life balance.” Work isn't separate from life; the two elements are different but interrelated. What happens in your personal life outside your job – attending a child's sporting event, for example, or an emotional conversation with your mother – affects how you feel when you arrive at work and how well you perform your role. Likewise, your experiences on the job affect your personal life. Perhaps you're a team leader who performs significant emotional labor – encouraging your team and tamping down your frustrations – during the work week. You're likely exhausted on Friday evening, making it hard to connect with friends and family on the weekend.

“Work and life are complementary and contradictory forces.”

If you want to lead teams that thrive, think of them like a group of gardeners, each tending a “work-life garden box.” All must grapple with a host of environmental factors – work and life events – that affect whether their gardens reach full “bloom” – that is, whether they, as employees, achieve their full potential. No garden box is the same. Each requires slightly different inputs and care. As a leader, it’s your job to identify the factors keeping your team members from thriving and to tweak these factors to ensure everyone has the support – or “soil conditions” – required for their gardens to bloom.

Prioritize six improvements to help employees thrive at work.

To help teams bloom, focus on improving the following six work factors:

1. **“Trust”** – Demonstrate consistent and authentic behavior – showing your employees they can trust you. Convey your trust in your employees by demonstrating your confidence in their abilities. Openly express your belief that trust and transparency are core workplace values and advocate for your team’s best interests.
2. **“Belonging”** – Help team members feel understood, safe and represented through positive, inclusive experiences. Team members should see people they can relate to – perhaps because they are of the same gender or race – represented in positions of power.
3. **“Value”** – Work to ensure team members receive fair and consistent pay. Recognize them for their efforts and demonstrate appreciation for their contributions.
4. **“Purpose”** – Team members feel a greater sense of purpose when they believe their organization’s actions, beliefs and intentions support the collective good and serve the interests of all stakeholders.
5. **“Strategy”** – Help team members connect their contributions to your organization’s broader strategy and regularly communicate organizational objectives to teams. Consult periodically with the leaders enacting your organization’s strategy, ensuring your team remains in alignment with the broader vision.
6. **“Norms”** – Set clear expectations regarding how team members should engage with one another, with leadership and with customers by creating guidelines or operating principles that support your desired work culture. Hold yourself and your people accountable to these norms to ensure consistency.

Support six life factors that will help team members be their best selves.

While you can’t improve all the elements in team members’ non-working lives, you can support six primary life factors that also bolster well-being at work:

1. **“Relationships”** – Support your people in finding community both inside and outside your company by creating opportunities for them to “find their people.” These relationship-building opportunities could include mentoring, peer learning groups, community volunteering days, special interest group meetings and online networking.
2. **“Skills”** – Help workers identify and develop the attributes and aptitudes they need to perform their work and life roles confidently. Also, coach them on how to grow their skill sets and provide opportunities to try new tasks. For example, your company might create an in-house gig platform that allows workers to take on projects outside their normal roles.

3. **“Well-being”** – Individuals can’t perform well unless they feel emotionally, physically, socially and financially healthy. Leaders should discuss these issues openly with their direct reports and empower team members to take care of their well-being – for example, by ensuring mothers have work arrangements that don’t run contrary to family obligations.
4. **“Meaning”** – How you feel about your work – whether you think it’s purposeful – is an important factor in whether you think your life is meaningful. So, support team members in making sense of their work: Help them connect their contributions to their personal values, the organization’s goals and a broader social good.
5. **“Agency”** – Ensure workers feel empowered to make choices and take actions that drive positive results. Identify ways for team members to help actualize team goals and achieve personal career development goals.
6. **“Respect”** – Show your employees you respect them by demonstrating care and appreciation for them. Listen to their ideas, express belief in their abilities and treat them with dignity.

Assess which of the four garden phases your team members are experiencing and tailor your support accordingly.

Individuals will inevitably experience challenging or adverse life events that hinder their ability to bloom. Support team members by identifying the phase of their gardens’ growth:

1. **“Renewal”** – These team members are dealing with numerous work and life challenges that keep them from performing at their best. Leaders should ask these workers how they can provide near-term support while encouraging them to think more deeply about their long-term goals and needs and what changes might be necessary to achieve those ends.
2. **“Budding”** – These individuals are succeeding in their roles but need further self-development to reach their full potential. Leaders should ask how they can support these people in the life-related areas – such as relationship-building or skills development – where they need to grow.
3. **“Stunted”** – These workers are thriving in their personal lives but feel stuck in a rut professionally. Leaders should focus on how they can help these team members with work-related areas such as trust or belonging.
4. **“Blooming”** – These people are thriving in their personal lives and job roles. While they may not be facing any major obstacles at the moment, leaders should continue to check in with these individuals to ensure that they can quickly provide support if a problem does arise.

Conduct “soil tests”: Converse with team members to determine areas where they’re struggling.

Like a gardener, leaders should conduct “soil tests” – assessments of team members’ work and life challenges – to ensure teams have everything they need to thrive. Your aim is to determine what, if anything, is preventing your people from achieving their full potential and to identify ways you can support them in blooming. Understanding what’s happening with your team requires attentiveness. Management thinker Tom Peters suggests cultivating attentiveness via “MBWA,” which stands for “managing by wandering around.” Regularly interact with team members to gain a sense of how the soil is in your workplace. Be inquisitive and empathetic about their work and personal lives. For example, remember the names of

people's children, notice when someone gets a new haircut and ask how a team member's home renovations are progressing.

"Continual conversations with your team members are at the root of the soil test. These conversations can become the fertilizer you need to help grow blooming crops, also known as your team."

Work to connect with team members on a genuine level: ask questions that take the pulse of their levels of trust, belonging and purpose; assess the effects of workplace norms; and gauge whether they feel valued and aligned with your organization's strategic direction. Such questions might include: "Do you feel safe to speak your mind at work?"; "How connected do you feel to others on the team?"; "Do you feel our organization operates with a high sense of purpose?"; "Is it easy to get work done around here?"; "Do you feel valued in your role/at work?"; and "Do you feel connected to our organization's strategy?"

Likewise, take inventory of life factors related to relationships, skills, well-being, meaning, agency and respect. Ask questions such as: "Do you feel you have a strong, reliable network in and out of the organization?"; "Do you feel confident about your current skills and abilities?"; "Do you consider yourself to be in a positive state of wellness right now?"; "Do you feel a sense of meaning and self-worth?"; "Do you feel you can make decisions and take action on them?"; and "Do you feel you are respected?"

Conduct "water tests": Assess your own performance.

A "water test" involves taking time to reflect on how well you are administering work and life-related support to your team, which, like water in a garden, profoundly affects whether your employees bloom. Self-reflective leaders can identify reasons why individuals may not be blooming and take action to replenish them.

"By metaphorically watering a team member's garden, you're specifically thinking about what you can do to improve your overall Work-Life Bloom leadership."

Ask yourself questions related to these categories:

- **The overall garden** – Which team members are blooming? Do team members have triggers that might prevent them from blooming in roles they enjoy? Do I know how to bloom myself?
- **Work factors** – Have I done everything I can to address the six work-related factors my team needs to bloom? Are there ways that I could replenish any work factors (like trust) that appear deficient?
- **Life factors** – Have I done everything possible to address the six life-related factors my team needs to bloom? Are there ways that I could replenish any life factors (like relationships) that appear deficient?

Even self-aware leaders won't always be in bloom. Navigate setbacks without losing hope.

As a leader, don't expect to be in full bloom all the time. When you feel stunted and unable to bloom, consider reflecting on your purpose and whether your work aligns with it. Are your own work and life factors

being tended properly? Can you fix these issues, or is it time to walk away and find a new role where you better align with the culture or strategic direction?

“The Work-Life Bloom model is as much about analyzing and fixing yourself as it is about preparing you to lead others more thoughtfully.”

You can't escape the interrelatedness of work and life. At the best of times, they will feel symbiotic, and you'll thrive both in the office and in your personal life. Other times, your metaphorical soil's PH balance will suddenly go off-kilter. Overcoming these challenges and restoring your garden to full bloom – along with those of the team members you lead – requires resilience. You must maintain hope while you adjust work and life factors, knowing that, in time, you and your team can once again be your best selves: in full bloom.

About the Author

Dan Pontefract is a leadership strategist, culture change expert and keynote speaker with more than twenty years of experience in senior executive roles. He's a best-selling, award-winning author whose books *Lead. Care. Win.* and *Open to Think* won the getAbstract International Book Award.



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