

## Stephen Swensen

*Leading with Kindness* is Dr. Swensen's message of hope with validated solutions. He serves as a Senior Fellow of the *Institute for Healthcare Improvement* and a Transformational Fellow at *The NARBHA Institute*, where his focus is cultivating leadership to advance personal fulfillment and healthspan in organizations and communities.

Dr. Swensen is dedicated to the development of thoughtful leaders who aspire to nurture the mental, physical, and social well-being of the people they have the privilege of serving. Stephen is a recognized expert, speaker, and interdisciplinary researcher in leadership, organizational development, and professional wellbeing. His most recent book features an evidence-based blueprint for co-creating ideal work (*Mayo Clinic Strategies to Reduce Burnout - 12 Actions to Create the Ideal Workplace*).



For 35 years he served patients at the Mayo Clinic. As Director for Leadership and Organization Development, he co-led the *Professional Fulfillment Initiative* and oversaw the development of 4,100 physicians and 232 key leaders. While Chief Quality Officer, his team established the Quality Academy wherein 37,000 colleagues were certified as Fellows. As Department Chair, he and his team used their *Value Creation System* to improve the welfare of both patients and professionals.

A Full Professor, he was Principal Investigator of two National Institutes of Health grants and has authored three books and more than 200 articles. He was honored with the *Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award*, served as the president of two international societies. He holds a Master of Medical Management degree from Carnegie Mellon University.

Stephen has been married for 47 years, has two children, and has completed 39 running and cross-country skate ski marathons.

# ***Leading with Kindness***

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this Viewpoint, *Leading with Kindness*, is to present an approach with five Leader Team Actions and five Governance Systems to support leaders in their quest to create a satisfying and meaningful career experience for colleagues that promotes physical, mental, and social wellbeing. The objective of the strategy is to cultivate optimal *Fulfillment and Healthspan* for all colleagues via policies and behaviors characterized by kindness.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – This Viewpoint is an evidence synthesis of a narrative literature review of the inter-relationships of kindness, occupational health, leadership, governance, healthspan, happiness, fulfillment, allostatic load, organizational democracy, participative management, and meaningful work.

**Findings** – Fifty-four evidence-based, cross-cultural, social, behavioral, and environmental determinants of *Fulfillment and Healthspan* were identified. They engender both *Fulfillment and Healthspan* because they have common physiological and molecular allostatic load pathways. Each determinant is the primary shared responsibility of societies, organizations, or individuals. Each has kindness at its root.

This Viewpoint is focused on the 24 determinants for which leader teams in organizations have the primary responsibility. These occupational health determinants are categorized into four domains: AGENCY (Control over Work Life), COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE (Meaning, Energy, and Harmony in groups of people with Shared Purpose), CAMARADERIE (Social Connectedness), and POSITIVITY (Optimism and Caring).

Five Leader Team Actions (Listen Sort Empower, Ikigai, Life Crafting, Commensality Groups, Morale Before Money) and five Governance Systems (Leader Co-Selection, Dyads & Triads, Agentive Teams, Five Kindness Behaviors, Kindness Effect Analysis) are presented.

## Introduction

### OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

The mental health of the workforce has deteriorated substantially over the last decades as occupational stress (i.e. – burnout, moral distress, work-life disintegration) has risen. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#) *Kindness — A People-Centered Leadership and Governance Strategy* is an approach to support leaders in their quest to create a satisfying and meaningful career experience for colleagues that addresses fundamental leader behaviors and occupational systems to promote physical, mental, and social wellbeing (and reduce occupational stress) in work life.

For millennia, philosophers across the world have explored the concept of wellbeing. Today, scientific research performed by sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, biologists, physicians, geneticists, et al contribute important insights beyond philosophy. [Helliwell \(2022\)](#) *Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth and Age 60 (2023)* [Furman \(2019\)](#) [Marmot \(2017\)](#) [Guidi \(2021\)](#)

Optimal *Fulfillment and Healthspan* is the collective result of societal, organizational, and individual acts of kindness.

### KINDNESS

Kindness is human interaction with prosocial emotions and behaviors: caring, generosity, altruism, empathy, gratitude, and compassion. In this Viewpoint it is proposed that kind behaviors, systems, and policies create positive, supportive, trusting, and meaningful social connections and cultures that are the bedrock of individual *Fulfillment and Healthspan*. [Marmot \(2017\)](#) [Guidi \(2021\)](#) [Nelson-Coffey \(2017\)](#) [Boarini. \(2012\)](#) [Prilleltensky \(2021\)](#)

Kindness is contagious. Spread is facilitated by *elevation*, a positive emotion prompted by observing other people engage in virtuous acts.

### FULFILLMENT

*Fulfillment* is about living a meaningful life filled with purpose, happiness, and satisfaction. *Fulfillment* includes components of human flourishing, positive life assessment, subjective wellbeing, and a life spent becoming the best person possible. There are two primary driver categories that contribute to a state of *Fulfillment*:

~30% Genetic Factors

~70% Social, Behavioral, Environmental Factors

Societies, organizations, and individuals have considerable control over *Fulfillment*. [Helliwell. \(2022\) Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth and Age 60 \(2023\) Furman \(2019\) Marmot. \(2017\) Maslow \(1943\) Ryan & Deci \(2001\) Seligman \(2012\)](#)

## HEALTHSPAN

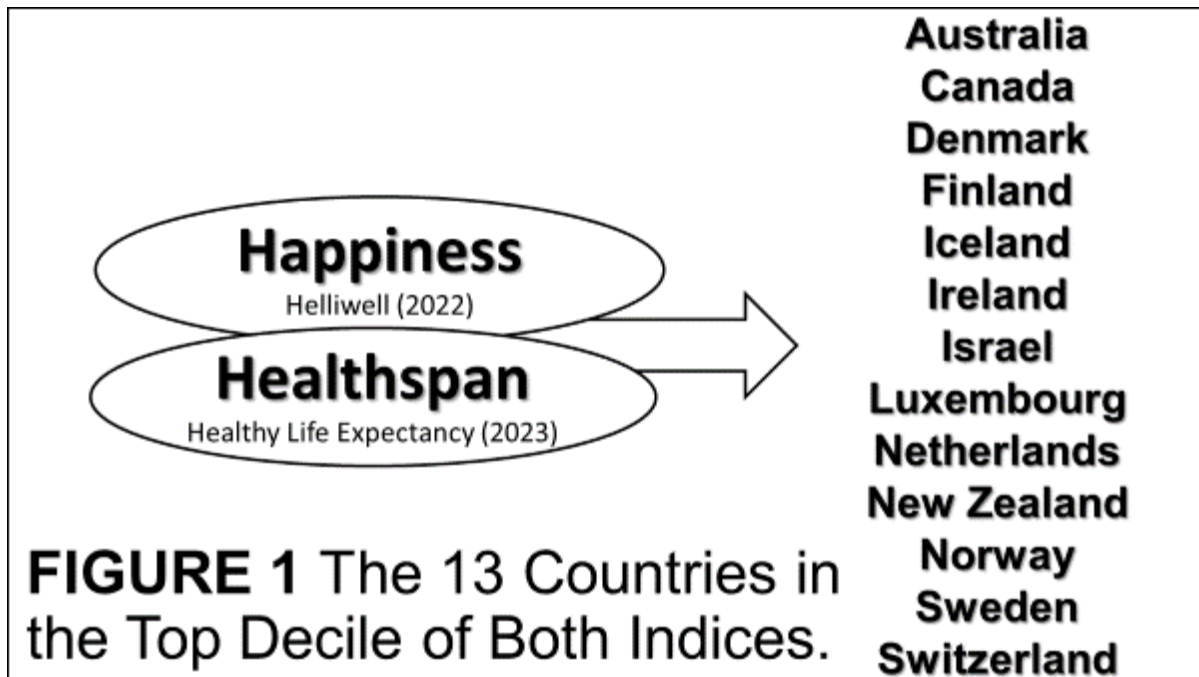
*Healthspan* is the subset of lifespan spent in good health. There is a nine-year gap between healthspan and lifespan in the world. The gap has been growing. [Garmany \(2021\)](#)

There are three primary drivers:

- ~10% Healthcare
- ~25% Genetic Factors
- ~65% Social, Behavioral, Environmental Factors

There are four broad causes of death that account for approximately 80% of deaths in a non-smoking population (i.e. – cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, cancer, and metabolic diseases). Increasing lifespan, in large part, involves addressing these conditions. Enhancing healthspan, in contrast, primarily involves addressing cognitive, physical, and emotional decline.

Societies, organizations, and individuals have considerable control over healthspan. [Helliwell. \(2022\) Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth and Age 60 \(2023\) Furman \(2019\) Marmot. \(2017\) Schroeder \(2007\)](#)



## Determinants of Fulfillment and Healthspan

The countries in the top deciles of the *World Happiness Report* and the *World Health Organization (The Global Health Observatory) Healthy Life Expectancy* indices were identified. [Helliwell \(2022\) Healthy Life Expectancy \(2023\)](#) There are 13 countries that perform in the top deciles of both *Happiness and Healthspan* components ([Figure 1](#)). When countries prioritize policies of kindness for their inhabitants and global neighbors, their citizens are more likely to experience *Happiness and Healthspan*. The relationship appears to be cross-cultural and causal.

Societies, like individuals and organizations, can address social, behavioral, environmental factors via policies and infrastructure that impact human wellbeing. Organizations share many functions and attributes of societies (eg, decision making, culture, rules, coordination of human behavior, preservation of order, management of education and power, etc.). Accordingly, there are lessons in these indices from the best performing countries for organizations. Freedom in all its manifestations, social and gender equity, all measures of quality of life, egalitarianism, and generosity are acts of kindness and influence wellbeing in both countries and organizations.

Experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies related to occupational health, leadership, kindness, healthspan, fulfillment, and happiness were reviewed for this evidence synthesis. Fifty-four determinants of *Fulfillment and Healthspan* were identified. [Guidi \(2021\)](#) [Diener and Chan \(2011\)](#) [Zhang \(2019\)](#) [Vaillant \(2002\)](#) [Holt-Lunstad \(2010\)](#) [Gillum \(2010\)](#) [Taniguchi \(2022\)](#) [Rim \(2019\)](#) [Wang \(2014\)](#) [Alimujiang \(2019\)](#) [Tanno \(2009\)](#) [Csikszentmihalyi \(1992\)](#) [Rozanski \(2019\)](#) [Lee \(2019\)](#) [Yang \(2016\)](#) [Danner \(2001\)](#). [Eddy \(2016\)](#) [Siegrist \(2017\)](#) [Harvey \(2017\)](#) [Knardahl \(2017\)](#) [Wahrendorf \(2016\)](#) [Nielsen \(2017\)](#) [Helliwell & Wang \(2011\)](#)

The determinants are shared throughout the diverse cultures of the world. Each has attributes of kindness, whether through societal, organizational, or individual spheres of influence ([Table 1](#)).

### Table 1— 54 Determinants of Optimal *Happiness and Healthspan*

- ORGANIZATIONAL PRIMARY SPHERE OF INFLUENCE
  - AGENCY
    - Freedom to make Life Choices
    - Absence of Chronic Stress
    - Control over Work Life
    - Individual Financial Resources
    - Work-Life Balance

- COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE
    - Camaraderie
    - Social Support
    - Community Spirit
    - Prosocial Behaviors
    - Trust
    - Altruism
  - *IKIGAI*
    - Strong Sense of Meaning
    - Fairness
    - Flow State
    - Striving for Important Personal Goals
    - Social and Gender Equity
  - *POSITIVITY*
    - Gratitude
    - Generosity
    - Laughter
    - Smiles
    - Curiosity
    - Caring and Kindness
    - Positive Affect and Reframing
    - Optimism
- 
- SOCIETAL PRIMARY SPHERE OF INFLUENCE
    - Education
    - Social Trust
    - Personal Security
    - Regional Geo-Political Stability
    - Democratic Rights
    - Housing Security
    - Moral Governance (Absence of Corruption)
    - Transportation Security
    - Gross Domestic Product/Capita
    - Natural Spaces
    - Early Childhood Experiences
    - Food Security
    - Clean Healthy Environment
    - Life Expectancy at Birth

- INDIVIDUAL PRIMARY SPHERE OF INFLUENCE
  - Health Status
  - Aerobic Fitness
  - Strength Fitness
  - Marriage
  - Anti-Inflammatory Diet (Unprocessed food, Plant-based)
  - No Xenobiotics (Tobacco, toxins, etc.)
  - Spirituality/Religiosity
  - Healthy Microbiome
  - Mindfulness Meditation
  - Forgiveness
  - Healthy Weight
  - Love
  - Self-compassion
  - Sunlight and Nature
  - Pet Ownership
  - Sleep

The *Societal and Individual Determinants* are critically important for *Fulfillment and Healthspan*, but they are beyond the scope of this Viewpoint which focuses on the *Organization Sphere of Influence Determinants*. Addressing professional wellbeing and occupational stress is a shared responsibility of organizations and individuals. Because the healthcare occupational health crisis is predominantly a systems issue, it is imperative that organizations first address the root causes (ie - Leader Team Actions and Governance Systems) before asking individuals to take better care of themselves. [Swensen & Shanafelt. \(2020\)](#)

#### ALLOSTATIC LOAD AND FULFILLMENT AND HEALTHSPAN

It is important to understand that there is a substantive scientific evidence base linking social, behavioral, and environmental factors to human wellbeing via allostatic load. Allostatic load is the biological wear and tear caused by chronic biosocial stress from environmental, lifestyle, psychosocial, and life stressor circumstances.

A large and growing body of research implicates chronic excessive allostatic load with systemic inflammation, telomere shortening, and DNA methylation with epigenetic consequences in the impairment of both mental and physical health. [Furman \(2019\)](#) [Guidi \(2021\)](#) [Eddy \(2016\)](#) [Siegrist \(2017\)](#) The 54 determinants share common physiological and molecular pathways that either bolster resilience to biosocial stressors or reduce allostatic load.



## The Role of Organizations

In the last two centuries lifespan doubled and humans transitioned from predominantly working independently as farmers to employment in organizations where most spend greater than half of their adult lives. Substantial advancement of lifetime *Fulfillment and Healthspan* can be fostered by addressing social, emotional, and physical well-being at work.

*Chronic* occupational stress is a fundamental cause of negative employee mental and physical health outcomes in large epidemiology and cross-sectional research studies. [Eddy \(2016\)](#) [Siegrist \(2017\)](#) [Wahrendorf \(2016\)](#) [Nielsen \(2017\)](#) [Harvey \(2017\)](#) [Knardahl \(2017\)](#)

Optimizing *Fulfillment and Healthspan* via the *Organizational Primary Sphere of Influence* entails mitigating biosocial work-related allostatic load.

The 24 organizational determinants can be classified into the domains of *Agency, Collective Effervescence, Camaraderie, and Positivity*. These domains comprise innate physiological and psychological needs that are essential for individuals to mitigate allostatic load and flourish. The 13 countries ([Figure 1](#)) in the top tier of both *Healthspan and Happiness* have elements of these four nurturing human conditions (eg - *Agency* [Freedom], *Collective Effervescence* [Community spirit], *Camaraderie* [Trust], and *Positivity* [Social and Gender Equity]). The conditions are derived from the Human Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, and Positive Psychology literature. [Maslow \(1943\)](#) [Ryan & Deci \(2001\)](#) [Seligman \(2012\)](#)

*Agency* is the capacity of individuals or teams to act independently.

*Collective Effervescence* is the sense of meaning, energy, invigoration, and harmony people feel when they come together in groups with a shared purpose.

*Camaraderie* is a multi-dimensional combination of social connectedness, teamwork, respect, authenticity, appreciation, loyalty, and recognition of each other's mattering.

*Positivity* is a disposition to optimism and positive affect with a mindset that sees opportunities for learning, abundance, and possibility in the world.

These four innate human needs are the primary responsibility of leader teams in organizations to establish.

## AGENCY

*Agency* is the capacity of individuals or teams to act independently. There is large body of organizational psychology and organization development literature that establishes the connection between lower allostatic load and the creation of wellbeing via *Agency* with person-centered organizational hierarchy management and governance practices. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#) [Nielsen \(2017\)](#) [Monsen \(2018\)](#)

*Agency-promoting* practices encompass the positive attribute of staff empowerment, a social process of recognizing, promoting, and enhancing employees' abilities to meet their own needs, solve their own problems and secure the necessary resources for colleagues to feel in control of their work lives.

*Agency* is present when there is organizational democracy, participative management, and shared governance with widespread intentional staff participation in tactical and strategic decisions. They comprise the elements of a systems approach to amplify the possibilities of the work community with higher levels of innovation, more meaningful work, enhanced performance, superior employee involvement, organizational outcomes, staff wellbeing, commitment, satisfaction, and lower rates of cardiovascular disease. [Harrison \(2004\)](#) [Theorell \[Quick & Tetrick\] \(2003\)](#) [Svendsen \(2022\)](#)

## COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE

*Collective Effervescence* is the sense of meaning, energy, invigoration, and harmony people feel when they come together in groups with a shared purpose. [Liebst \(2019\)](#) Imagine work with systemic *Collective Effervescence*.

Engaged healthcare professionals experience an energetic state of immersion in fulfilling activities that enhance their sense of professional efficacy. *Collective Effervescence* entails the social connectedness, camaraderie, mutual respect, friendship, teamwork, trust, and social capital that individuals and organizations must have to thrive. *Collective Effervescence* has a positive impact on social, physical, and mental health. [Vaillant \(2002\)](#) [Rim \(2019\)](#) [Yang \(2016\)](#) [Holt-Lunstad \(2010\)](#)

*Ikigai* is an ancient Japanese concept meaning "one's reason for being." *Ikigai* is associated with longevity and may be one of the reasons that Okinawa, Japan has among the highest proportion of centenarians in the world.

*Ikigai* is a helpful model to understand intrinsic reward and recognition in our professional lives. It is the confluence of three personal determinations:

1. What One finds Meaningful.

2. What One is Good At.
3. What The World Needs.

Leaders can play a central role in connecting colleagues to the meaning and purpose of their employment. People who report having purpose in life, have fewer health problems, live longer and experience greater life satisfaction. [Alimujiang \(2019\)](#) [Tanno \(2009\)](#) [Kumano \(2018\)](#)

*Collective Effervescence* that aligns with one's Ikigai is a powerful force of resilience.

### CAMARADERIE

Camaraderie is defined as connectedness to and recognition from colleagues. Humans are social creatures. Healthcare professionals need the fellowship and companionate support of their coworkers. People thrive with improved mental, emotional, and physical health in communities of a socially connected team of people who care about each other.

Camaraderie and engagement are irreversibly intertwined. Engagement is a mutual relationship in which the organization values the clinician, and the clinician believes in the organization.

Teamwork is an important dimension of camaraderie. Intact, stable, and supportive teams deliver better and safer care, superior patient experience scores, higher nurse retention rates and lower operating costs.

### POSITIVITY

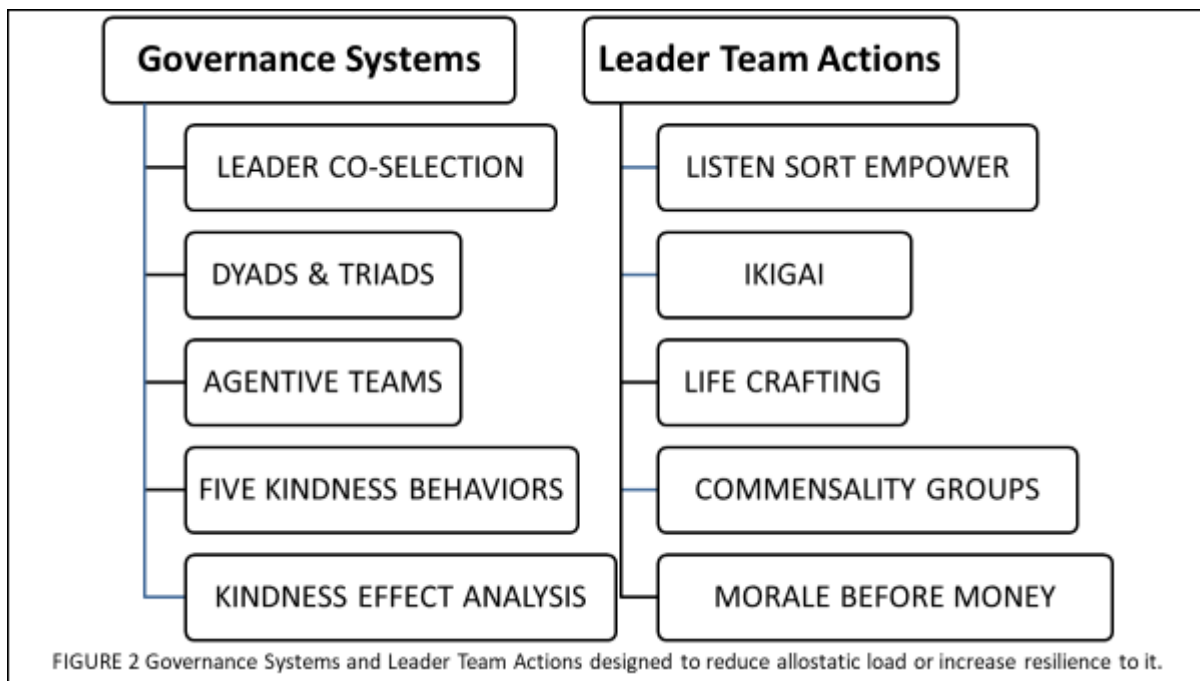
People with a mindset of positivity look at the world and see abundance, learning opportunities, and possibility. The Domain of *Positivity* encompasses the determinants of optimism, caring, kindness, generosity, smiles, laughter, curiosity, reframing situations in a more positive light, positive affect, and gratitude.

Workplace *Positivity* elements include organizational determinants of leader development and selection, fair and just culture, mentorship, coaching, and role modeling. Those elements of kindness support professional career development and fulfillment. There is an established body of research showing that workplace *Positivity* lowers allostatic load and is associated with superior organization performance and employee mental and physical health. Negative emotions are consistently associated with poorer mental and physical health. [Seligman \(2012\)](#) [Rozanski \(2019\)](#) [Lee \(2019\)](#) [Danner \(2001\)](#)

Even though there is a genetic component to *Positivity*, there is much opportunity to change behaviors, actions, and habits for optimal *Fulfillment and Healthspan*.

## Proposed Leader Team Actions and Governance Systems

Following are ten Leader Team Actions and Governance Systems that align with the organization determinant categories (Figure 2). Each Action and System has been validated in practice and is based on established leadership and organization development principles. Because they promote *Fulfillment and Healthspan* in the people with whom one works, each can be viewed as an act of *Kindness*.



### 1) Leader Team Action to Promote *Agency*: LISTEN SORT EMPOWER

LISTEN-SORT-EMPOWER is a staff-directed collaborative action planning, problem-solving system that builds a friendly work environment. This Leader Team Action engenders cohesive work units that can address challenges that arise. The team-based approach engenders *Agency* and assumes that systems and behaviors—not people—are the source of most workplace problems. LISTEN-SORT-EMPOWER is a participative way of leading (not an autocratic management initiative) that engages teams in daily co-production improvement and problem solving. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\) AMA Steps-Forward/Module/2767765 \(2020\)](#)

It has three steps:

- a. **LISTEN** to staff to understand what makes for a good day. Then seek to understand the *Opportunities for Improvement* from the frustrations, team dynamics, conditions, and workflow issues that get in the way of a good day. Leader Teams can't achieve ideal work without asking colleagues what matters to them.
- b. **SORT** the *Opportunities for Improvement* by prioritizing based on impact, feasibility, and sphere of control. High impact, feasible *Opportunities for Improvement* beyond the local sphere of control are communicated to appropriate organizational leaders who commit to open and timely communication.
- c. **EMPOWER** (and support) the work unit team members as they address the *Opportunities for Improvement* prioritized as the highest impact, feasible issues within their sphere of control.

LISTEN-SORT-EMPOWER is authentic participative management that engages staff as partners rather than employees to improve morale, dynamics, effectiveness, and workflow. In a study of 217 work units in a healthcare organization, satisfaction (17 percentage points), teamwork (12 percentage points), and burnout (21 percentage points) improved. [Swensen, Kabcenell, Shanafelt \(2016\)](#)

Another healthcare organization using a similar collaborative action planning produced a substantial improvement of professional fulfillment in 18 departments over an 18-month period. Burnout was reduced in 17 of the 18 departments. [Shanafelt, et al \(2023\)](#)

LISTEN-SORT-EMPOWER promotes organizational democracy, increased decision latitude, and employee participation and empowerment that contribute to improved well-being, professional development, and productivity. [Theorell \(2003\)](#)

## **2) Governance System to Promote Agency: LEADER CO-SELECTION**

Organizational protocols for the selection and transition of leaders are attractive opportunities to employ principles of organizational democracy that engender staff agency, wellbeing, trust, and engagement. When staff co-select their leaders, they are at the table as trusted partners building social capital and developing engagement. Co-selection cultivates buy-in of the staff and sets the newly appointed leader up to succeed. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#) [Swensen, et al \(2016\)](#)

These are fundamentals of a validated *Physician Leader Co-Selection Model*:

- The selection protocol and dyad/triad model are transparent to all.
- The staff who will report to the new leader are all involved in the selection process.

- Before the planned transition of an existing leader, each member of the work unit is visited by a colleague who works in another area and asked: “Who would make a good leader of your work unit?”
  - Input is also sought from department leaders who have a key relationship with the one in leader transition.
  - The results are reviewed and the top three to four individuals identified by work unit members are invited to be candidates for the position.
- The candidates are interviewed by a search committee led by staff from a department other than the one in leader transition.
  - The new leader is selected by this staff/institution co-production process.
- Term limits: newly appointed leaders understand that they have the privilege of serving a maximum of eight years with formal annual reviews.

The spirit of this system is to smoothly transition leaders and support them for success. The process is designed to select and develop leaders who have earned the trust and respect of the colleagues they will be serving in both the department and the organization. Co-selection helps change the pronouns used to reference leaders from “*they and them*” to “*we and us*.”

Systematic rotation of leaders is a governance consideration for wellbeing that gives regular leadership opportunities to others. It accelerates development, creates an organizational perspective, and cultivates a holistic organizational perspective instead of a local and siloed orientation. Systematic rotation of leaders also engenders a healthy transition from a holding company relationship to an integrated boundary-spanning operating institution. Term limits facilitate the rotation of incumbents to other roles to gain boundary-spanning leadership experience and to generate fresh ideas. Limited leadership tenure may be of value to the organization and the individual. [Luo \(2013\)](#)

### **3) Leader Team Action to Promote *Collective Effervescence*: IKIGAI**

For Leader Teams to facilitate connection to meaning at work, individuals must understand what is most important to them in their work lives. A helpful leader-team led exercise is to ask colleagues to reflect on what work-related activities, people, perspectives, and tasks are most rewarding and meaningful to them. In *Ikigai* terminology: *What do you love that you are good at, and the world needs?*

An important role of team leaders is to help connect colleagues to the meaning of their work. Purposeful work experience increases work motivation and engagement, life meaning, and general health. Meaningful work experience driven by intrinsic reward mitigates the focus on

more extrinsic reward. Meaningful work experience may reduce negative affect, withdrawal intentions, and mortality. [Allan \(2019\)](#)

This exercise is an important precursor to the *Life Crafting* conversation.

#### **4) Leader Team Action to Promote *Collective Effervescence*: LIFE CRAFTING**

Because one's *Ikigai* is more about life than just work and much of our adult life involves work, *Life Crafting* may be a preferable term to job crafting. *Life Crafting* is a design process that can be initiated by work unit leaders. It entails changing how individuals relate to work and spend time to better align with goals, skills, and fulfillment desires.

*Life Crafting* increases engagement and job satisfaction and decreases burnout. When healthcare professionals spend at least 20% of their time doing work that is most meaningful to them, they have one-half the rate of burnout compared to those who spend less than 20% time doing what is most meaningful to them. [Shanafelt et al \(2009\)](#) *Life Crafting* improves *Fulfillment and Healthspan* by increasing engagement, flow, and focus. A substantial proportion of thoughts are not related to what we're doing. It turns out that people are most happy when thoughts and actions are focused and aligned. An engaged mind is a happy mind. *Life Crafting* is a means to take more control of the meaning in one's life. [Dubbelt \(2019\)](#)

Leaders can facilitate productive *Life Crafting* discussions with staff they serve and help in the construction of more meaningful work by addressing the three variables of *People, Allocation, and Perspective*:

Start with this question:

- What tasks create the most energy and meaning?

Then look for opportunities to *Life Craft*:

- People
  - Choose to work with people you admire, enjoy or who are most positive.
- Allocation
  - Change scope or proportion of work to most energizing and meaningful tasks.
- Perspective
  - Connect tasks to positive outcomes (eg – Environmental Services Professional who views work as reducing infections and saving lives, not just sanitizing rooms)

*Life Crafting* is a perfect means to reap the dividends of *Ikigai*.

### **5) Governance System to Promote *Collective Effervescence*: LEADER DYADS & TRIADS**

*Leader Dyads and Triads* is a governance system that pairs newly appointed clinician leaders with an administrative partner to help set them up for success. The model allows profession leaders (ie - musicians, engineers, lawyers, physicians, nurses, etc.) to be more effective leaders if they maintain a presence in the work of their profession. Partnering a profession leader with an administrative leader (eg - business or management-trained administrator) is a model that promotes staff engagement and the wellbeing cascade of collective effervescence dividends. [Swensen, Gorringer, Caviness, Peters \(2016\)](#) In the hospital setting the leadership partnership is often a triad (ie - physician, nurse, administrator).

The shared work of leadership and management can look like this:

- Physicians are responsible and accountable for the clinical practice, research activities, physician education programs, career development, and performance of the medical staff.
- Administrative partners take responsibility and accountability for day-to-day operational management duties and the performance of all non-medical staff.

This approach develops physicians as leaders not businesspeople. The administrative partners fill the role of “businesspeople.” Physicians bring their clinical, research and education experience to their leadership role. Physicians also have their peer relationship with clinicians with whom they will need a trusting relationship to lead change and manage personnel issues. It helps keep the pronouns: “*we* and *us* and *ours*.” The administrator partners have business and management expertise and a broad understanding of the institution. They lead by managing the business side of the operations, including non-physician/scientist colleagues.

One of the strengths of the dyad and triad partnerships is the synergistic and complementary cross-disciplinary skill sets and experiences. [Didehban \(2020\)](#) [Rummans \(2011\)](#)

### **6) Leader Team Action to Promote *Comaraderie*: COMMENSALITY GROUPS**

Commensality is the act of sharing a meal and conversation with others. Throughout human history, people of every culture have developed rituals based on sharing meals together. There is something special about breaking bread with other people whether they are friends, colleagues, and/or family. Sharing a meal together is one way to build community, promote team performance, and establish positive feelings about the institution.



Intentionally designed *Commensality Groups* can be used to encourage colleagues to explore the virtues and challenges of their lives and to support one another. *Commensality Groups* are designed to cultivate vital human connections by encouraging small groups of colleagues to gather for a meal and engage in conversation about their experiences. They have proven effective in improving meaning, purpose, positive feelings about the organizations, and reducing burnout in two randomized controlled trials. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#) [West \(2021\)](#)

Commensality, collegiality, and social connections with peers are critical components of *Fulfillment and Healthspan*.

### **7) Governance System to Promote *Camaraderie*: AGENTIVE TEAMS**

The Dutch Buurtzorg (“neighborhood care”) nurse-led organization achieves extraordinary home care results by focusing on meaningful relationships with negligible hierarchy. Buurtzorg has more than 800 home care teams. They are organized as *Agentive Teams* wherein groups of 10-12 nurses are self-governed and assessed by their outcomes of patient and staff experience, and the quality and cost of care. Their results are excellent, and their governance model is exemplary. The model is spreading throughout Europe and America. [Monsen \(2013\)](#)

By design, *Agentive Teams* are trusted with the autonomy to take an active role in their work via principles of self-governance, wide decision latitude, participative management, organizational democracy, results-oriented work environment, collective work unit decision-making, and leader co-selection. [Swensen, et al \(2016\)](#) *Agentive Teams* have control over their work life, with a combination of organizational democracy, collaboration, and self-management. *Agentive Teams* appears to be healthy for both organizations and individuals. [Clove & Goldsmith \(2002\)](#)

Governance and Leader Team models that cultivate agentive work conditions engender superior engagement, fulfillment, and productivity that leads to improved staff mental and physical health.

### **8) Leader Team Action to Promote *Positivity*: MORALE BEFORE MONEY**

How leaders allocate their time and attention sends a message to the colleagues they have the privilege of leading. When leaders chose to start meetings and reviews with authentic discussions of morale and opportunities to improve it, engagement is much more likely to advance than if the initial and primary focus is on productivity and financial measures.

Current and credible measures of staff wellbeing are requisite for relevant conversations about morale. Without appropriate measurement (e.g.- leader behaviors, teamwork, fulfillment, emotional exhaustion, psychological safety) it is impossible to know if staff work in a community rich in support and social capital, and with the necessary resources to achieve their goals and those of the organization. [Swensen, et al \(2016\)](#)

When leaders discuss action plans for their work teams to pursue, the first dialogue should be regarding staff and patient/family experience. It should precede the discussion of finances and productivity. The systems of reward and recognition are a component of authentic interest in staff morale. Intrinsic, in contrast to extrinsic, reward and recognition cultivate a culture wherein colleagues are more likely to have a relationship with their work as a calling (in distinction to experiencing one's work as a job or a career).

The morale of staff should be authentically seen as a priority by both measurement and action. It should be discussed openly and often, and lead to team-based and staff-informed remediation. [Swensen, et al \(2016\)](#)

## **9) Governance System to Promote Positivity: FIVE KINDNESS BEHAVIORS**

Leader behaviors can create a culture of *Positivity* with substantial improvement in staff wellbeing. Research demonstrates a relationship between leader behaviors and subjective wellbeing. The *Five Kindness Behaviors* studied correlate with staff wellbeing at an organization of more than 70,000 staff and 3,300 direct report leaders. With data from annual surveys wherein staff assess the behaviors of their leader, logistic regression showed that each 1-point increase on a 60-point leader score scale was associated with a 7% decrease in odds of burnout and an 11% increase in odds of satisfaction of employees ([Figure 3](#)). Amidst all the qualities of the organization (i.e., culture, organizational strategy, salaries, benefits, efficiency), 47% of satisfaction variation between work units was explained by the behavior of an employee's immediate leader. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#)

**FIGURE 3**  
Leader Kindness  
Behaviors that reduce  
emotional exhaustion  
and engender  
satisfaction.

Shanafelt et al (2015)

AMA Steps-Forward 2774089 (2020)

**SEEK TO UNDERSTAND**

Solicit input from colleagues with humility.

**APPRECIATE**

Recognize associates with authentic gratitude.

**MENTOR**

Nurture & support the coworker aspirations.

**BELONGING**

Welcome everyone with respect and empathy.

**TRANSPARENCY**

Communicate openly for collective decisions.

The ideal work unit size for authentic leader relationships is approximately ten staff. This size allows for regular 1:1 meetings that cultivate the relationship dividends of the *Five Kindness Behaviors*. [Swensen, et al \(2016\)](#) With more than a decade of experience, the relationship appears to be causal in this organization. [Shanafelt et al \(2015\)](#) [AMA Steps-Forward/Module/2774089 \(2020\)](#)

The spirit of these *Kindness Behaviors* is to engender a spirit of belonging where everyone can be their authentic self at work. Humans have an innate sense of fairness and a desire to be treated equitably. The work environment must be positive for everyone. People are predisposed to *Fulfillment and Healthspan* (in society and at work) when they experience a culture of social and gender equity with comparable opportunities and treatment. [Marmot \(2017\)](#) And organizations thrive – teams function better, and customer experience improves. [Ugur \(2021\)](#) The western world has not yet achieved gender equity in science and medicine. Social and gender inequity erodes health-related outcomes for those shortchanged. [Shannon \(2019\)](#)

Transparency is an element of the *Kindness Behaviors* and is the foundation of trust and a component of positivity. Transparency assures employees that the organization has a moral compass and will treat its people fairly (e.g. - pay scales, privileges, work and call schedules, promotions, etc.). For example, pure salary models with full transparency embrace healthier intrinsic motivation, promote cooperation over competition, and engender collaboration over

competition. The risk of occupational stress is highest for those in productivity-based compensation extrinsic reward models because they incentivize overwork which may erode meaning and purpose, amplify challenges with work-life integration, and promote competition over collaboration with colleagues. [Swensen & Shanafelt \(2020\)](#)

The *Kindness Behaviors* contain elements of organizational democracy. Institutions that practice organizational democracy experience increased employee commitment, involvement, and satisfaction with higher levels of innovation and, in the end, enhanced organizational performance from greater staff participation in value creation and organizational decision making. [Harrison \(2004\)](#) And there is a strong relationship between participative management and meaningful work. [Svendsen \(2022\)](#)

## **10) Governance System to Promote Positivity: KINDNESS EFFECT ANALYSIS**

Most organizations require some form of rigorous *Financial Effect Analysis* for business plans. More recently, some organizations have extended their due diligence with a *Quality Effect Analysis* to ensure that the core attribute of quality is enhanced or at least not negatively impacted. As we more fully understand the mission-criticality of kindness in work culture and systems, one could advocate for the inclusion of a *Kindness Effect Analysis*. A *Kindness Effect Analysis* could include business case metrics of engagement, turnover, collegiality, teamwork, fulfillment, and absenteeism.

Although there is a solid financial case for prioritizing staff fulfillment, the best rationale for pursuing the strategy is simply kindness to those with whom one works. [Shanafelt, Goh, Sinsky \(2017\)](#)

## **Conclusions**

*Leading with Kindness* is designed to create a fulfilling career experience for all colleagues that promotes physical, mental, and social wellbeing. The best leaders in organizations (and countries) have behaviors, policies and systems that treat people with kindness.

The design weaves *Agency, Collective Effervescence, Camaraderie, and Positivity* into the fabric of workplace culture with intentional Leader Team Actions and Governance Systems. Success is predicated on trust between team members and leaders. With this blueprint, *Fulfillment and Healthspan* are spawned during one's days in organizations, the largest segment of most lifetimes.

This evidence synthesis of a narrative literature review reveals that 54 organizational, societal, and individual determinants are acts of kindness to citizens, staff and to one's neighbors and self. They engender both *Fulfillment and Healthspan* by reducing allostatic load or increasing resilience to it, because they have common physiological molecular pathways.

Optimism means hope with evidence. There is reason to be optimistic about the prospects of creating a better world. The strategy, evidence, and experience already exist.

*Good people who are well* is the foundation of organizational excellence. *Organizations can do well by doing good.*

Imagine for a moment what the world would be like if our policies and our people were guided and infused and inspired by Kindness...

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