

Work wellbeing: When everyone's vulnerable at once

Spark thought it was on track with its mental health and wellbeing programmes - until Covid lockdowns started, and employees' and leaders' stress levels were put to a whole new kind of test | Content Partnership

Heather Polglase knew everything had changed when, a few days after the March 2020 countrywide Covid lockdown began, the number of calls she was receiving from leaders across the company started skyrocketing. These were good leaders, many of whom hadn't needed help before. Now they were calling for help, asking, "How on earth do I support my people through this pandemic?"

Polglase, human resources director at Spark, New Zealand's largest telecommunications and digital services company, had stepped into the role in September 2019. At that time, the company saw itself as proactive in the corporate wellbeing space - going beyond standard health and safety, and 'step challenges, fruit bowls and yoga classes'.

"We had a roadmap, we had a strategy, we had good policies and standards."



Spark's HR director Heather Polglase had only been in the job six months when lockdown changed everything. Photo: Supplied

But suddenly, we also had a global pandemic. A nation's workers were sent home, putting pressure on Spark's network and services - and the people running them. At the same time Spark people, like all Kiwis, were worried about their health, their jobs, their families, and their futures. Leaders found themselves in a situation where it was much harder to judge stress levels and talk over concerns in the way they had always done before - face to face. Polglase realised she needed a whole new response.

"My team and I were having all these conversations with our leaders; they were grappling with how to manage uncertainty with their people in a virtual way.

"They were asking me 'How do I navigate this, how do I figure out where my staff are at and what they need from me, when people are essentially at the other end of a camera?'"

Meanwhile, at the same time, the leaders were saying they felt vulnerable themselves, and exhausted from the intense intersection of home and work life, the uncertainty in their own lives and jobs, and from trying to stay connected with others without face-to-face contact.

Polglase knew there wasn't anything Spark could do to take away the fear everyone was feeling about getting Covid - that was in the hands of the gods, and the Government. But as an employer, there were things the company could do -

particularly around the stress people inevitably felt about their jobs in those very early days of the pandemic.



The intense interaction between home and work can be exhausting. Photo: Getty Images

The leadership team developed a series of principles to guide decision making, at a time when the company had to adapt rapidly to a multitude of different impacts. The first one was that Spark would do everything it could to keep its people "productively and gainfully employed through this time of uncertainty", Polglase says.

“Basically we were saying, we will prioritise maintaining employment wherever possible, and look at other interventions to adapt our business to the impacts of Covid.”

Second, the company decided as far as possible it would offer any jobs that came up to internal candidates, rather than looking outside the company.

“It was about focusing on our 5000 Spark employees and providing comfort to people that we recognised and would prioritise the richness of skills already inside our business.”

A culture of listening and feedback

The next steps were to find out what where people were at and what they needed in terms of wellbeing support. Spark uses the employee feedback tool ‘Joyous’,

to ask its people weekly and quarterly questions about their experiences at Spark, and their answers are fed back to their people leader.

“We introduced more wellbeing questions into our listening and feedback tool processes - questions like ‘Do you feel connected?’ ‘Do you feel able to ask for support?’ and ‘Do you know where to go for support?’ The answers people gave us went directly to their people leader, so they had a feel for where their team was at and what support they needed.”

This also gave Spark a data set and more insight to recreate its approach to wellbeing, and a new strategy was launched off the back this feedback – Mahi Tahi.

“We now have four clear focus areas within our wellbeing strategy that ensure we are taking a holistic approach to how we support our people. These are: the environment we create; how we are connecting; mind health; and our energy levels.

The resilience trap

This holistic approach to wellbeing hasn’t always been a feature of workplace cultures, Polglase says. In the past, there was often a lot of emphasis put on the power of resilience, when it came to people’s ability to deal with challenging life events and the stress that comes with them. But that’s not always helpful.

“Resilience was often presented in a deficit-based way – something you didn’t have enough of. People felt what they needed was to get more resilient, and then they would be OK, then they could keep facing into those headwinds.”

The trouble is that life isn’t as easy as that, she says. Different challenges - and different people - require different sorts of help. While some people ‘go it alone’, others need more support – and that’s ok.

Polglase isn’t immune herself. At the start of the lockdown she says she found herself in the situation of being in a new, exacting job, facing massive uncertainty at home and work – and with a preschooler around all the time.

“I’m on a steep learning curve, it’s a whole new role, it’s a whole new level, and there’s my three-and-a half-year old. There are a lot of competing priorities.”

"Everyone says it takes a village to raise a child. But it also takes a village to raise an adult. So I have my village

around me too." – Heather Polglase, Spark

Going into the Spark job, Polglase had what she calls her “tight five” support network. They included a performance coach, a mentor, her boss and a former boss.

With the additional stresses of Covid and juggling childcare with her husband, she decided to expand that network, adding three more people to her wellness team.

“I now have a 'tight eight'. Everyone says it takes a village to raise a child. But it also takes a village to raise an adult. So I have my village around me too. They all have a different role, and I’ve been quite clear and purposeful about the role they play, and I have asked if they are prepared to help me with my wrap-around of wellbeing more generally over this time.”

Polglase says she has been open with people at work about the fact she’s finding it tough – hoping that gives them permission to be open about what’s going on with them.

“We did a business live session on wellbeing, and I said: ‘Look I’m really hoping that Wonder Woman doesn’t turn up in the background because she’s been hanging around here lately in her superhero outfit. Actually, I’ve given the outfit it to my daughter Georgie because someone wise told me the other day that Wonder Woman never had kids.

“And that whole life vulnerability around ‘I’m really struggling’ has been important for people to see and understand from me.”

Before her daughter was finally able to return to daycare last month, Polglase also used to share with her team the end results from their daily craft sessions – she’s particularly proud of the Very Hungry Caterpillar made from egg cartons.

That helped too – or at least made everyone laugh.

"How do I support 5000 people's wellbeing? The hard truth is that enterprise-scale solutions to fixing wellbeing are a myth. No one solution

can succeed at this scale.” – Heather Polglase

“Your resilience will be tested multiple times in your life -- over, and over, and over again,” she says. “And at all those different stages when it is tested, you may well need quite a different intervention.”

There is no one size fits all, to help us build and foster greater wellbeing and resilience. There are only different solutions for different people at different times, Polglase says.

“And that’s one of the things a lot of larger businesses really struggle with; how do I support 5000 people’s wellbeing? The hard truth is that enterprise-scale solutions to fixing wellbeing are a myth. No one solution can succeed at this scale.”

Beyond Employee Assistance

The Covid lockdowns also saw Spark rethink its employee assistance programme (EAP), which provides free counselling services to its people, through a contracted provider, for home and work issues.

It became increasingly clear an EAP professional, while an important part of the mix, could not be the answer for everyone in all situations, Polglase says.

"Employee Assistance Programmes cannot solve everything, so it's the definition of insanity to keep trying.” – Heather Polglase

“I was thinking, ‘Okay, so if someone's job materially changes through an organisational redesign, we send them to EAP. Now we're in a global pandemic, and they're struggling with ambiguity – so we send them to EAP. When leaders are not quite sure what to do, and we might not have the expertise internally to help -- we send them to EAP.’

“And I thought, surely EAP cannot solve all of these things, that would be an impossibility? So it's the definition of insanity to keep trying.”



One-on-one online counselling is just one of the options on the table for Spark people. Photo: Getty Images

Spark started to expand the expertise it provided to its people during lockdowns. They offered personalised crisis and trauma responses for individuals and teams who particularly needed this level of care. They brought in a range of wellbeing partners to run virtual webinars and master classes that could be accessed by anyone at any time.

There were psychologists and psychotherapists, a breathing and anxiety specialist, a former police crisis negotiator with practical solutions to stress and anxiety; and a former New Zealand hockey player who helped Spark people apply tactics from high performance sport to handle the ups and downs of their roles.

Polglase says the success of this approach has now informed how Spark is expanding the range of external people providing wellbeing services to its people beyond EAP on a longer-term basis. In the spirit of experimentation, a trial starts early next year where the company will have a psychologist and a psychotherapist working one day a week at the company, and it is training up its own people to provide wellbeing ‘first aid’.

Mental health first aiders

The company is set to launch an internal programme where up to 20 people from across Spark will train as wellness coaches, doing their normal job part of the time, and being available to support other Spark people for a certain number of

hours a week. Think of it a bit like the trained first aiders in an organisation, Polglase says, except their role will be more ambulance at the top, not at the bottom, of the cliff.

The advantage of having employees (rather than outsiders) taking on these roles will be that they might better understand the context of someone's problem, particularly the work-related bit, she says.

“For example, many of us are struggling with work prioritisation - how do I juggle my workloads and what's going on at home? With an external counsellor, you might have to spend a lot of time explaining the sort of work you do before they can help. An internal person will already have that context.”



Amanda Maoate says Spark's wellbeing coaches will be "eyes and ears on the front line".
Photo: Supplied

Executive coach and registered psychotherapist Amanda Maoate will be working with Spark to help recruit, train and certify the wellbeing coaches before they start working. She says it's an exciting project, because it adds another layer of support for staff, alongside EAP and the new in-house mental health team.

“It's a way of developing way more eyes and ears out there on the front line.”

But there are also potential pitfalls when “corporate meets clinical”, she says, not least making sure the right sort of people are chosen.

“People will need to have a high level of integrity and confidentiality, really good empathy, communication skills and a passion for wellbeing.”

Getting a diverse range of people is also important, she says, to reflect the diversity of the Spark people they will be supporting.

So, how are people doing?

Lance Burdett is a former builder, who retrained as a police officer and spent two decades in various roles with police, including as a crisis negotiator. He's supported Spark people through a masterclass for leadership in building resilience. He's also had his own experience with depression - "I was suicidal as New Zealand's lead suicide negotiator," he says.

These days he's an author (his latest book, *Dark Side of the Brain: Adapting to Adversity* was published in September last year) and runs consultancy company WARN International. He recently ran a workshop with Spark's wider leadership group.

He says he sees the same physiological reactions to this period of ongoing ambiguity and stress everywhere - people having a dry mouth most of the day, people eating or drinking too much, feeling tired by the middle of the day, having catastrophic thoughts, or random flashbacks, people wanting to go to bed early, having strange dreams or waking three or four times in the night.

**“Our brain is trying to find a path where safety is, but can't find it, so it goes into a little bit of overdrive.”
– Lance Burdett, WARN International**

“In every organisation right now, all of these things are happening. I haven't met a single person over the last six months who isn't having one of these things going on in their lives.”

It's all about the brain and our 'preconscious' thoughts - ones that we aren't using at the moment, but can be easily retrieved, Burdett says. Faced with so much uncertainty in the world, our brains are working overtime trying to come up with solutions from our past, he says. No wonder we are so tired.

“Our brain is trying to find a path where safety is, but can't find it, so it goes into a little bit of overdrive.”



Lance Burdett says our brains are working overtime to find solutions. No wonder we are tired.
Photo: Supplied

Worse, our brains have what is called a ‘negativity bias’, a tendency to remember more of the negative things that happen to us than the positive ones, he says. So those bad things are the ones that can emerge from the preconscious brain – catastrophising.

How widespread is all this?

The most recent data suggests Spark people are largely representative of the broader New Zealand population. “Forty percent of Spark people feel they are doing OK, 50 percent are feeling some sort of strain, whether that be work, home, caring for children, health or others. And 10 percent are really struggling,” Polglase says.

“We need to have support available to all those people wherever they are on that spectrum – from ok, to strained, to really struggling.”

Information overload

It’s an irony not lost on Polglase that Spark is trying to get its wellbeing messages through to a big, diverse workforce just at a time when people are being swamped with information and are struggling with overload, distraction and poor concentration.

A few weeks after launching its four-pronged wellbeing framework, she was invited along to talk to one of Spark's teams. "There were lots of people there. I put up the framework and I said, 'I'm taking it that by now you've all seen this.' And I looked at everyone, and they kind of looked back at me and I went: 'OK, I'm taking it you haven't all seen this.' It turned out only about a third had seen it.

"That it was a big moment for me, because it wasn't that it wasn't a good framework - it was. It's just that people going through lockdown have an increasingly diminished capacity to absorb information."

'A solid start'

A little over two years after starting her new role at Spark, how does Polglase rate what's been achieved in terms of wellbeing at the company? In the same way Covid accelerated companies' businesses moving their products and their people into a digital environment, so the pandemic has made wellbeing more necessary and more urgent, she says.

How far down the road is Spark on the journey? Although there's no finishing post, Polglase reckons she's about halfway to where she wanted to get to when she started.

"We've got a really solid framework, all the care and will in the world, some great partners, and we are starting to get really robust data and insight informing the actions we take.

"But it takes a lot of tenacious, ongoing effort and focus to make sure it's bedded in and woven through the business. We are constantly reviewing our offerings and initiatives and evolving them.

"If I had to put a marker in, I'd say we will get to where we want to be by the end of 2023."

Spark is a foundation supporter of Newsroom.co.nz. This is the first part of a two-part series about workplace wellbeing. Part two, tomorrow: Six practical tips for looking after your mental health - and that of your employees.