WHY SHOULD YOUR WELLBEING MATTER TO ANYONE ELSE?

MORAL REASONS FOR PROMOTING WELLBEING IN ORGANISATIONS

Is a focus on wellbeing a 'nice thing to do' in organisations, or are there more fundamental arguments? In this Op-Ed, **Suzanne Shale** outlines ethical arguments for making wellbeing a priority.

KEY POINTS

- **We all have an interest in our own wellbeing, and to some extent our own wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of others. But self-interest is not the only reason to support the wellbeing of others.**
- **Attending to wellbeing requires trade-offs with other goals. If organisations and social institutions are to prioritise wellbeing, they must have compelling ethical reasons for doing so.**
- **Arguments for prioritising wellbeing can be made from each of the major Western ethical traditions.**
- **Leaders of organisations, along with their staff, should discuss and reflect on the reasons for focusing on wellbeing**

Please take a moment to try this thought experiment, devised by the renowned British philosopher Bernard Williams (Smart and Williams, 1973).

Jim is a distinguished botanist exploring a country caught up in the midst of a vicious civil war. He finds himself in a village that has been captured by Pedro, the head of an armed militia. Tied up against the wall are twenty randomly selected villagers, whom Pedro was about to execute as an example to potential resisters. Made aware of the arrival of his eminent visitor, Pedro decided to show clemency. If Jim will kill one of the twenty villagers, then as a special mark of the occasion, the remaining nineteen villagers will be let off. If Jim refuses, then Pedro will proceed with the execution.

Williams posed his readers the question, "What should Jim do?" but I would like you to consider a slightly different one. What do you think you would do?

Thought experiments are designed to provoke, and to stay with us as we examine our assumptions. They are intended to be unsettling. This one, while obviously unrealistic, is designed to highlight the limitations of basing our decisions on consequences alone.

In many of the professional groups with whom I've discussed the challenge, an initial response is to grab the gun and shoot Pedro. Williams anticipated this. He wrote that a quick assessment of the situation shows that if you tried this then you, as well as all the villagers, would end up dead.

After further reflection, responses fall into three different lines of reasoning. Some will argue that it is better to save nineteen lives at the expense of one. Those adopting this reasoning will often go on to assess the value of the lives to be taken or spared. Disconcertingly, even among health professionals there will frequently be a consensus that elderly, disabled or unwell villagers might be chosen in order to spare healthy adults and children. A second line of reasoning is that killing an innocent villager would be so at odds with a person's absolute commitment to the sanctity of life that they would refuse to do it, even at the expense of their own life and those of the villagers. This group argues that all the responsibility for the deaths properly attaches to Pedro, and not to themselves. A third line of

argument concentrates on the nature of conscience and virtue. This group contemplates the reality of having to live the rest of their life with the consequences of their action on their conscience. They attempt to weigh this against the mathematical calculus that Pedro is suggesting.

What bearing does any of this have on the business of promoting wellbeing in aviation and other social institutions? The purpose of this article is to set out the ethical arguments for why we should make others' wellbeing a priority, not just a 'nice to do'. Promoting wellbeing involves many considerations. For example, it calls for attention to human factors and ergonomics, to the nature of the built environment, to action on bullying, harassment and incivility, to support for team functioning, and to our own role as bystanders when we observe troubling behaviour. Common responses to Jim's dilemma reveal the three major Western ethical traditions, and how we all use them in our day-to-day reasoning. Drawing on these ethical traditions, we can sort the wide range of activities that go to promoting wellbeing into different types, and see how they are supported by different ethical justifications.

Not providing for the wellbeing of those responsible for others is not just an operational problem, but an ethical breakdown.

Your wellbeing matters because it has consequences for others

One tradition in ethical theorising emphasises the consequences of our actions. The best known of these, called utilitarianism, was proposed by the nineteenth century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarians argue that the ethically optimal solution is one that achieves the greatest good for the greatest number of sentient beings, all of whom count equally in the calculation. We should aim to maximise the achievement of 'worthwhile' pleasure, and also minimise pain and suffering. In its time, utilitarianism represented a revolution in moral thought. It challenged the moral grip of the church. And it opposed nineteenth century status distinctions by insisting that the wellbeing of all sentient beings (even women and animals) should be considered.

Much of the ethical content of professional life is underpinned by such 'consequentialist' considerations. And much of the ethical justification for attending to the wellbeing of professionals is consequentialist in nature. Managing risk in high-hazard activities requires leaders and colleagues to manage the impact of fatigue, stress, illness, mood, hunger and thirst, toxic team dynamics and all the rest. This is not only in the interests of the individual, but because of the dangerous or damaging consequences for others. This is an obvious truth in the world of aviation, but in the spheres in which I work (healthcare, humanitarian operations and policing) it has yet to be fully grasped. On consequentialist grounds, I would argue that not providing for the wellbeing of those responsible for others is not just an operational problem, but an ethical breakdown.

Your wellbeing matters because we owe each other respect

While consequentialism can carry us a long way, it was the problematic nature of utilitarianism that inspired the Jim and Pedro thought experiment. One major problem in acting to maximise benefits is that this can lead to the moral interests of some (e.g., in being alive) being sacrificed to promote the moral interests of others. The competing ethical tradition places emphasis on obedience to absolute rules and duties irrespective of the consequences. It is following the moral rule – such as a rule against killing – that is right, in and of itself.

Those brought up in a religious faith will no doubt be able to recall several such rules. The most celebrated secular theory of 'absolute duties' was proposed by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, when you consider how to act you should ask yourself whether, if you formulated a universal law that was binding on everyone at all times, then your act would be compatible with it. This is more or less consistent with the 'golden rule' that you should treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself. According to Kant, we should also always treat humans as an end in themselves, not as a means to an end.

This so-called 'duty-based ethic' clearly prohibits us from sacrificing the interests of one to the interests of the many. And having a duty to treat people as an end in themselves, not as a means to our own ends, requires us to treat everyone with respect.

Wellbeing is commonly undermined by behaviours that fail to meet up to the standard of the golden rule, or the principle of equal respect. Take bullying, harassment, incivility, and discrimination as examples. We know that these behaviours are nasty, but more than that, they violate fundamental ethical duties. Being bullied, harassed, treated uncivilly or discriminated against is dehumanising. It feels like being treated as merely a means to another's end. And such behaviour has consequences for individual and team performance. It is thus wrong with respect to both duty and potential consequences.

Leaders and colleagues who permit the emergence of a toxic workplace culture are breaching the ethical duties they owe to others, as well as falling foul of legal and corporate obligations.

Your wellbeing matters because professionals should strive to be virtuous

On the surface of it, this third ethical justification is closest to the idea that promoting wellbeing is simply a nice thing to do. But if we look closer, there is a stronger claim to be made.

Virtue ethics is one of the most long-standing ethical traditions. Virtue ethics proposes that good decisions ultimately arise out of the good character of a person. An ethical person will aim to live a good life, and achieve full flourishing as a moral person. Consciously cultivating virtue, we hope to grow wiser with practice. This coarse summary hints at one of the commonest criticisms of virtue ethics, which is that it is somewhat self-centred. It could lead to 'keeping one's hands clean' at the expense of achieving valuable goods by accepting moral compromise.

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Classical and Christian theology embraced four character traits as 'cardinal virtues'. These were prudence (the wisdom to choose the appropriate course of action), courage, temperance or self-control, and fairness. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) has argued that if we want to know what is virtuous in the modern world, we have to attend to the valuable goals that are intrinsic to the practice itself (so-called 'internal goods'), rather than any additional advantages gained from pursuing it (external goods).

In the practice of medicine, this includes the prevention of ill health, cure of disease, alleviation of pain, and the advancement of medical science. The 'external' goods are such things as financial reward and the esteem of peers.

Returning to aviation, one obvious 'internal good' of the practice is transporting people safely. Another may be doing so at least cost to the environment. What virtues do aviation practitioners and leaders need to cultivate in order to accomplish these ends? What virtues will allow them to sustain the wellbeing of colleagues in pursuit of aviation's 'internal goods'? To the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, self-control and fairness) we might add honesty, empathy, humility, trustworthiness, and courtesy. These are virtues that we all owe to each other, regardless of our role or rank.

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