



How to Build a Culture People Want To Be Part Of



If you run a small business, you know the struggle. There's never enough time, never enough people, and the budget is always a limiting factor.

So when someone says, "prioritize employee wellness," it can sound like another big expense, not to mention something you just don't have the resources to implement.

No one will argue that taking care of your employees is important but wellness programs are for big corporations, right?

Maybe yoga studios and gyms are. But there are ways to introduce and monitor wellness levels even in the smallest of businesses.

Why Wellness Is Critical to Your Success

Your business is only as strong as your most disgruntled employee. Dissatisfied workers aren't good at customer service. Their dissatisfaction will be evident to those they're trying to help. Even if your team isn't forward facing, a burnt-out employee can spread their angst to other members of your team and erode productivity and moral.

Your team's stress level doesn't care that you're a small business. And if you don't think your team has a problem, you need to consult the data, which is waving a very large flag.

A recent USA TODAY|SurveyMonkey workforce survey found that 24% of workers say they're either struggling (12%) or burnt out (12%). An article on Small Biz Trends called it a wake-up call for owners. It also encouraged simple, practical moves like regular check-ins, mental health resources, and a culture of open communication as ways to get these numbers turned around.

This matters because burnout doesn't just feel bad. It gets expensive.

The Cost of Ignoring Burnout Is Real

Turnover isn't just the cost of posting a job and running interviews. It's:

- lost productivity while the role sits open
- extra workload on your best people (who then start browsing job sites at lunch)
- training time, mistakes, customer friction, and knowledge walking out the door

[Gallup](#) estimates the cost to replace an employee can range from half to two times their annual salary. And those costs vary by role type. Gallup also notes replacement costs around 200% for leaders/managers, 80% for technical professionals, and 40% for frontline employees.

Small businesses feel that hit harder because every person is a bigger percentage of the operation. One resignation can create a domino effect: missed deadlines, stressed coworkers, and customers who start to wonder what's going on behind the curtain.

So no, you don't need a corporate wellness program. You need a culture where people can do good work without slowly melting down.

What Wellness Means in a Small Business

Employee wellness isn't a perk. It's the day-to-day experience of working for you. Think of it as your internal brand. A strong sense of employee wellness can keep employees hanging on through the tough times. Many of us have the mistaken idea that wellness is ping pong tables in the breakroom. But it's not. It's:

- Clarity instead of chaos.
- Respect instead of mind-reading.
- A manager who notices instead of ignores.
- A pace that's intense sometimes, not all the time.

Think of it as preventive maintenance. You're not trying to create a spa. You're trying to keep the engine from blowing on the freeway.

Micro-Actions That Move the Needle (Without Draining Your Calendar and Wallet)

Resources are stretched for many small businesses, so a company culture relaunch is probably not feasible. That's why we compiled a list of small, realistic actions that compound into a healthier culture. Pick a few. Build from there.

The 10-Minute "Pulse Check" (Weekly)

Ask three questions of each of your team to get operational intelligence:

- What's one thing going well?
- What's one thing making your job harder than it needs to be?
- What's one thing I can remove, clarify, or decide?

Decide Quicker

A huge source of stress is uncertainty. If you can't decide today, say when you will. Clarity is calming.

Create a "Red Flag" Phrase

Give employees a simple way to signal overload without shame:

"I'm at capacity." Or "My plate is full-full."

Then your job (or the manager's/supervisor's) is to respond like an adult, not a courtroom attorney. Be thankful that they admitted they couldn't take on another task. That means they safeguarded the company from a disappointing customer experience.

Protect One Quiet Hour

Pick one hour a day (or two afternoons a week) that's meeting-free and interruption-light. Make it normal to do focused work without constant pings.

Normalize Taking PTO for Actual Rest

That SurveyMonkey report even tracks people using PTO for rest and mental health. If your culture subtly punishes time off, burnout wins. If coverage is hard, rotate "on point/on call" responsibility so people can truly unplug.

There should never be a reason to disturb an employee on vacation just because someone can't find a file. Not only does that call disrupt them in the moment, but it also adds stress causing them to wonder what else will go wrong and what the next call or text will be about. Instead of relaxing, they will be on high alert.

Make Workload Visible

When everything lives in your head (or Slack chaos), people feel like they're failing even when they're working hard. A simple shared board (Trello, Asana, a whiteboard) plus weekly priorities reduces stress fast.

Praise Specifically, not Generically

"Great job" is adequate.

"Great job handling that upset customer. You listened to their concerns and escalated the matter quickly and appropriately. I'm happy to announce that because of you, they renewed with us." makes the employee feel good and helps to identify what's important to you as a culture.

Recognition doesn't cost money. It costs attention.

Set "After-Hours" Expectations

If you text at 9:30 pm, your team feels the pressure of always being on call. If you must send messages late, add: "No need to respond until tomorrow." Better yet, use the scheduling feature so they don't receive them until business hours.

While you may just want to shoot them an email so the thought doesn't slip your mind, just remember your habits upset their nervous system.

Build One “Safety Valve” for Hard Weeks

Create a plan for crunch times such as:

- temporary shift swaps
- a pre-set “drop list” of nonessential tasks
- a rotating admin/helper hour
- shortened meetings

Crunch happens. Suffering doesn’t have to be the strategy.

Ask for One Improvement Idea Per Month (And Implement It)

This is how you build trust: ask, choose, act, repeat. Culture improves when people see proof. No one wants to be asked their opinion just to go unheard. When you implement an employee suggestion, give the employee credit (unless they prefer otherwise. Some people don’t like to be called out in a group. Make sure you understand your employees’ motivations and preferences.)

The Mindset Shift That Makes This Doable

Small business owners often assume wellness requires money. Most of the time office wellness can be achieved through altering leadership behaviors that induce daily stress such as unclear priorities, constant urgency, and silence (or ignoring) when people are struggling.

But stress doesn’t just go away (entirely). It leaves residuals behind so that the next time someone feels stress they’re not starting from the same unstressed place they did before. They start at a level two (or more). That means it tends to escalate quicker in the same way that when you’re run down you are more susceptible to illness.

Your goal is not to make work easy. It’s to make work sustainable.

Because when 24% of workers say they’re struggling or burnt out, it’s not a “nice to fix later” issue. And when replacing even one employee can cost anywhere from 50% to 200% of their salary, “we can’t afford wellness” quietly becomes “we can’t afford turnover.”

Start small. Start consistent. Treat culture like the business asset it is.

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