

Jennifer Posa

We're in a very, very difficult time right now. That's not only difficult for leaders, it's difficult for employees, it's difficult for everyone, because the rules of the game are changing. This is really around how do you function as a leader, as an employee, as a person in times of change and uncertainty.

Ellen Kelsay

That's Dr. Jennifer Posa, who served as the first Chief Well-being Officer at the Central Intelligence Agency, where she designed and executed the first Congressionally mandated workforce well-being program in the intelligence community. Jennifer is a thought leader on workplace culture and building psychological strength and readiness in challenging environments.

I'm Ellen Kelsey, and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers.

Today we're talking about how to take well-being from simply a set of programs to an organization-wide strategy that supports both employees and the business. We discuss what Jennifer has learned from her unique experience and what employers should keep on their radar as they navigate high cost, high stress, and highly fluid environments.

Jennifer, welcome to the podcast. So thrilled to be speaking with you again. Thanks for joining us.

Jennifer Posa

Oh, it's so good to be here.

Ellen Kelsay

Well, we are really excited for this conversation. I want to start with your role as Chief Well-being Officer for the CIA. That was especially noteworthy, not because it was just a first for the agency, but also because it's a senior level title that really isn't commonplace among many organizations. So please tell us, what was that role like? What does it mean in practice?

Jennifer Posa

Yeah, first I would just say that it was such an honor to serve as the first Chief Well-being Officer at the agency. It's an incredible organization and really something I'm quite proud of. My job was to define the strategy and execute that strategy for the organization. That involved establishing the office, which was what you might expect around staffing, expertise, resourcing, governance, regulations that might need to be put in place. Identifying the priorities and then the specific goals to achieve around priorities, identifying stakeholders, partners, managing communications, and then something that's critically important, which is how do you measure your success and your impact. At the end of the day, the role was really as the accountable senior leader in the organization that would ensure the officer's well-being supported mission, because anything that the agency does is to achieve our mission.

Ellen Kelsay

Well, we also have to talk about the CIA is not just any other organization. When you talk about the mission of the organization and well-being in particular within an organization such as the CIA, that is just an unbelievably different level, I think, of complexity and nuance. Speak to how you approached this role within particularly the CIA.

Jennifer Posa

My responsibility, Ellen, was really to make sure that, again, we could achieve our mission as an organization, which really means that every officer protecting national security has the ability to perform at their highest level. Everything we know about health and well-being in terms of our own performance levels impact whether officers can achieve their mission. Regardless of what role an officer has, if they are not at the highest level of well-being, they won't be able to leverage that well-being to achieve their individual job, which then supports agency mission. So the premise behind all of this was to ensure that we could build a culture and really integrate well-being into the fabric of the organization in ways that hadn't been done in the past. One thing I will say, and a credit to the agency for sure, is when I took on that role,

it wasn't that well-being didn't exist. It wasn't that individuals weren't focused on it. It was just a shift from being maybe individual programs to a strategic priority. I think that's the piece, Ellen, that is critically important for organizations to understand and leverage. Because when we do actively, strategically prioritize the health and well-being of employees, their performance is impacted in a positive way and in many senses, we're proactively reducing barriers, challenges for them that would enable them to perform at the highest levels as a human being.

Ellen Kelsay

Could not agree with you more there and I'm just so fascinated by all that you just shared. I do want to circle back to how this was a Congressionally mandated initiative. Can you give us some context for how that came to be? How did Congress decide this was necessary? How was it supported? What's the back story there?

Jennifer Posa

Every federal agency is supported through Congress. It's our taxpayer dollars that pay for the government to run. Director Bill Burns, who was the director at the time, him and the leadership team at the agency approached Congress and said, we really feel, and I'm sure this was based on the evidence that the Business Group and many of the folks that you engage with within your membership, we've proven over the decades, well-being and health impact business performance. When Director Burns and his leadership team identified this as a strategic priority, it was because they felt as though if they strategically defined and executed an initiative focused on this, they would truly impact their mission success. They really were the team that convinced Congress that this was the right investment and the right priority moving forward. Then that's when they gave me a call and afforded me the opportunity or invitation, I should say, to join the organization and define what that looked like and execute it based on my experience in the field and doing the work that I've done.

Ellen Kelsay

That's great. Thank you. You've mentioned a few times already the strategic prioritization of well-being and really having it be interwoven into the fabric of an organization and not just being a program. Can you share some concrete examples of what that looks like in practice, if done well.

Jennifer Posa

I think it's really a very important question that you're asking because it can't be just theoretical. You have to bring the theory into practice. For me, when you ask me about what is a concrete example, it's actually measuring not only where we are in terms of well-being, but it's also providing that data to your functional leaders that have the ability to take that data and then determine what they can do with that data so they can actually take action. What that is called and what we would call it at the agency was performance tradecraft, because in the intelligence world, tradecraft is kind of the mastery of skills. Performance tradecraft is how can Ellen approach her job each day and actually making sure that the science of well-being, the science of human performance, the science of neuroscience can actually be considered when we design Ellen's job, when we look at her day and what we're asking her to do, when we are thinking about how our teams engage with one another. Are we considering cognitive load? Are we considering whether or not Ellen needs strong interaction with others or basically uninterrupted strategic thinking time in order to achieve her job? That's an example of how you can take the theoretical to a concrete level. The second example that comes to mind is around a specific area or problem that an organization might have. I'll use the example of when I was global head for mental health and well-being at Johnson & Johnson. Our goal was really to make sure that mental health was as important and as much of a priority as our physical health. J&J has an entire business built around neuroscience, some of the greatest scientists in the world that understand how the brain works. It was very obvious to us the importance of mental and emotional health, but when I came into that role, there was a huge opportunity to say, how can we do this differently and how can we, again, to your point, concretely, proactively change the way we are executing in this area. Interestingly enough, when I was in the role, COVID had hit, so it exacerbated the need exponentially. But in that example, I would say we wanted to make sure that it would be as easy for people to take care of their mental health as it was for them to take care of their physical health. So, Ellen, if you could go to the gym, which was on the fourth floor of the building and build your physical strength and build your physical health, then we want it to be just as easy for you to build your mental health, your emotional health and

your mental and emotional strength. Well, access to mental health care, quality of that care that you're receiving, and then the outcomes of that care ended up being our North Star. In that example, we looked at the service model, we looked at how employees were accessing mental care resources, what would happen if there was a need, a treatment, a diagnosis that was needed, where would they go, what were their options, etc. We redesigned that service model. We redesigned leadership behavior so that leaders understood, how could we, again, make it as permissible to go seek mental health care support as it was to go get a knee replacement and come back to work and given flex time to accommodate maybe additional time getting to and from work because you had to recover from an injury. Then last would be the employee actions that we would want to see so that we could ensure there was equity, if you will, across mental and physical health and well-being. I think those are two really concrete examples, one that points to specifically how you can change the behaviors of leaders all the way down with overall well-being science, psychology, neuroscience, to build your performance level. Then the second, which was a very much a strategic shift in how we provide services, benefits, as well as support an area of strong need for any workplace.

Ellen Kelsay

Those are all fascinating examples and really do speak to your background as an organizational psychologist as you've approached it. I think just even listening to you speak to that, I can hear probably a lot of your training coming through in terms of how you approached the role, the programs, the engagement with leaders and I took note of the performance tradecraft, not only because it sounds pretty cool, but also it puts it in the vernacular of the organization. It is something that is very consistent with how leaders would otherwise be talking about other things within the organization, so I think that's really critical and well done as you were approaching that. Anything else you would share in terms of your background as an organizational psychologist and maybe how that really has brought some different perspective to your role as a chief well-being officer than maybe other organizations who have people leading well-being may not fully appreciate that they might want to consider. Any pearls of wisdom or nuggets there that might not be obvious to others in the role, but that you have found helpful and incredibly beneficial based on your training.

Jennifer Posa

Yeah, in my career journey, I realized that there was this incredible discipline of organizational psychology that studied the behavior of workplaces, not only behaviors of individuals, but teams. How do cultures get created? I've been fascinated with this area ever since I was in my twenties and realized what I'll call how it really works and why things really happen. I look at it from the behaviors of the organization, which are driven through policies, rewards, structures, all sorts of things that we put in place as human beings. Naturally, I want to, if you will, right-size those in order to ensure there's greater human performance and greater business success. Some of the things that I always am looking at are the relationships that determine the success of the organization. That is usually how is the organization structured and what are the policies they're putting in place. Oftentimes, organizations create policies and then they never go back to the policies, or the policies sit on a shelf, or the policies have unintended consequences. But nobody's paying attention to that and realizing, wow, if we could just modify that policy slightly, you might actually have incredible behavior that's pointing in the direction you want, giving you additional rewards. Then processes, and I think we're seeing a lot of this with the age of AI right now, because those business processes, if you just keep on layer process over process over process, we begin to work for the process instead of the process working for us. That's what I have found and that's oftentimes what's impacting an employee's well-being, because they're in these processes. It's like a web or a spaghetti map of processes that ends up reducing efficiencies, reducing performance levels, reducing productivity. All of those things are really important, but they begin at the relationship, the relationship between the employee and the employer, all the way to the relationship that people have with the structures, policies and processes.

Ellen Kelsay

You just mentioned the relationship and starting really from there. Jennifer, when you and I met maybe a month or so ago, you made a comment about we're at a point in time where employers are redefining the psychological contract. I'd love for you to explain what does that mean and how does that relate to employee well-being?

Jennifer Posa

Yeah, so back in my early days of learning, I had learned about what I think is such an important construct that everyone who works within organizations should understand. It's this construct of a psychological contract. When we as employees join an organization, we establish a new relationship, but what is underneath that is not only the physical contract that you sign as an employee, but there's this psychological contract that, in many senses, determines the reciprocity expectation. So Ellen, I'm going to work for you and you're going to pay me a dollar an hour to do this job. If you start paying me 80 cents one week instead of a dollar, because that was something you did, or you changed a policy, or maybe there was a new requirement for me, then all of a sudden, what originally was established has changed. That's a super simple example of this. But if we take this and we say, there's this reciprocity expectation and then as expectations are changed by either the employee or the employer, we have to understand that psychological contract has now changed. Where we get into a challenge, from my perspective, that touches well-being, that touches business performance, is when employees don't understand why it changed or why that give and take started to morph. They feel as though there was some unfairness related to that. They're not receiving the same amount of, if you will, reward that they should for the amount of effort expended. There's all sorts of things that can happen. It can negatively impact an employee's discretionary efforts, sometimes their perspective, because again, the relationship is changing. I might not think that Ellen's respecting me or valuing me as much as she used to. The other piece of this is their efficacy, their ability to feel like they can do the job might also be impacted, depending on how things might change. There's so much that kind of is rolled into that psychological contract. I think it's really important to think about that and understand it, because when you go into the work that we do and you think about the fact that there's a psychological contract that exists, a reciprocity equation that was established, if it's going to change, and it could even change for the better, I'm talking about how it changes potentially for the worse, but it could change for the better. Regardless, it's going to likely impact the trust between employees and employers. We all know that trust is everything in relationships. That's what I do believe is happening right now, because the relationship between the employer and the employee is changing so dramatically, because AI is starting to come in, if you will, as a new workforce member. We do have to redefine the contracts, but we need to be mindful that there's not only a written contract, there's also a psychological contract.

Ellen Kelsay

We also know that it has not been an easy time for leaders responsible for health and well-being. There is an awful lot being thrust upon them, runaway health care costs, innovation coming at them left and right. Some of that's good, some of that's confusing. How should leaders navigate this period of reckoning and needing to make some decisions that on the surface may be the right long-term, well, are the right probably long-term decisions, but on the surface seem perhaps disruptive and may have a negative connotation to an employee. How should they navigate this period of time?

Jennifer Posa

I'll share with you my recommendation, but also I think something that I've done throughout my career that has worked really well during really, really hard times. I do completely agree, we're in a very, very difficult time right now. That's not only difficult for leaders, it's difficult for employees, it's difficult for everyone. The rules of the game are changing. This is really around how do you function as a leader, as an employee, as a person in times of change and uncertainty. Having really rich experience in many organizations filled with high performers and that are very, very competitive and some of the most demanding jobs in the world, I think your first focus as a person, as a leader, should be on resilience and your own resilience. Because I can tell you that if I'm being asked to do something very difficult, like make hard choices, design new strategies, really that very important work that an organization is relying on me to do as an executive leader, I would say, do I have the mental strength? Do I have the well-being state of well-being, if you will, where I'm not exhausted, I'm not burned out, I'm not feeling completely overwhelmed or I only have 30 minutes to figure out a strategy that's going to last me for the next three years. I think I would put well-being and resilience as the very first step for leaders and be looking at themselves. Then when they know, okay, these are the three things I have to do in order to be in the right state of mind to do this with the right people around the table, then I would redesign for what I call readiness, which is exactly what we've been talking about, Ellen. I think we can rebuild and truly redesign our workplaces, our jobs, what we do together through the lens of readiness, rather than reacting. I think

that's also very important and that is looking at your culture, that is looking at all of the structures, systems, processes, policies that you have in place. It's saying are these actually helping the employees perform at their highest levels or not. When we approach it in that way with readiness as the goal, there's actually a shift that happens because you're no longer looking at that negative, but all of that takes basically a step back to your point and reevaluating what you have going on and what's working, what's not. Oftentimes, we have all of these really wonderful individual initiatives, programs, that they are less than impactful without it being a full strategy and oftentimes putting a pause on things or removing something is the right decision. You asked a really important question at the end, which was, this can feel like disruption to employees. That's where I would say the communication piece of this and the measurement piece of this are two things that you cannot dismiss from your execution and your planning stages, because if you do not include all of your stakeholders, including your employees, in the process, they will feel blindsided, they'll feel as though it's a disruption, they'll feel as though something's being done to them, not for them. But if you allow them to sit around the table and provide you the input that you need, and by the way we do need that input, you're never as smart as the employee doing the job that you're trying to redesign. So you really do need to get that input at the front end, then they don't feel as much disruption because they felt like you've been bringing them along with you and basically using all of their input to make sure that you make the right decisions on what has to be let go versus what can stay.

Ellen Kelsay

That was amazingly comprehensive and thoughtful. Thank you. I wrote down so many things I wanted to follow up with you on, but a few things that I wrote down were the resilience, the readiness, the realignments, and the necessity to spend the right amount of time to do each of those things thoughtfully. Then you also talked about how important it is to manage the change management and communication and transparency and being honest. I'm very glad you also mentioned employee input and not forgetting to include them and bring them along for the ride and have their voices heard throughout all of this. I do want to ask you, as we are thinking about these choppy waters and times that we're all in, anything on the horizon as we think about the next year to two years that you think will be back to the readiness and preparing and potentially realigning the organization? Anything that you think that well-being leaders should be really keeping top of mind as we move forward in the next year or so?

Jennifer Posa

I think they need to be honest, and honest is what's working and what's not. Just because it worked in the past couple of years isn't still going to work based on this new environment we're in. I think we really do need to ask those hard questions. I've always found that when you identify what can be either replaced or removed before you're asked to do it, it's so much better. You get to pick. Let's imagine that you have to reduce. What does that look like and does that actually result in a negative or a positive? Sometimes you'll find that it actually results in a positive. The second thing I think of is just a really easy question that you can ask tomorrow, today, and throughout probably the next 12 months to 24 months, which is, is AI transformation helping you or hurting you? Ellen, if you and I ask that question of ourselves every single week, are you saying hurting or are you saying helping? If it's hurting, then you immediately have to figure out how to shift that to helping. If you're unsure, then you need to figure it out because that means it is doing something because it's there. I hear a lot about the shadow, the AI shadow, and it's what's happening with AI with your employees that you don't even know. It's amazing what can happen if you're honest to say, we know that we are going to have to become more efficient. We know that there's an opportunity to create greater efficiencies. Therefore, we are going to invest in AI, and it is going to be a part of our strategic focus moving forward. We do know jobs will change and our positions will change. What we are going to do is we are going to work through this together and we're going to identify what you believe, where you believe AI should help you so that you can help us redefine where we're going. That is sometimes what is causing a lot of the angst is because the pressure from the C-suite is you need to do it fast, you need to do it tomorrow, and I need to see the plan. The biggest challenge is for the leaders that are working through these strategies to say, I need the time to do it right and that time does have to be likely faster, but there's a negotiation here on the time. I think that's where the art of the planning will come in, Ellen, and the leaders who do this well are going to negotiate pilot timeframes, which enable the stakeholders to provide the input that they need. It's very important to recognize that AI is already at the table and you have the ability as an expert in this area to ensure that the transformation can support our performance as organizations. I think that's a responsibility, an incredibly important responsibility that

chief people officers, CHROs, chief wellness officers, chief health officers, chief well-being officers, chief medical officers, whoever is touching human performance, human behavior, and relationships to the workplace, this is our responsibility to ensure our success as human beings and our success as human-built organizations. We don't want to rebuild the system in ways that compromise people. That's just wrong and I don't think we have to. That's where I see the opportunity. I think there's huge opportunity in the next 12 to 24 months, and the leaders that are going to prove me right are the ones that will be honest and truthful about what works, what doesn't, and refinements, as well as making sure that they're creating new scorecards, and then finally, constantly evaluating AI transformation and incorporating it for the good of people.

Ellen Kelsay

I have maybe a follow-up question. It's a companion to that, is when you think about the next, you talked about all this opportunity in the next 12 to 18 months, what gets you most excited when you think about those opportunities?

Jennifer Posa

I get really excited because I have, like everyone else, been learning so much about the capabilities of AI, and I'm a futurist, and I'm an optimist, so I tend to lean into the positive and the opportunity side. I see it giving us the ability, if we do the right things and we have the right scorecards and we have the brilliance that I know is in our sphere and even in your membership with the organizations and leaders that are part of your membership, I think we have the opportunity to redesign work in a way that enables individuals to get back time and really allow themselves to be more purposeful in their work and in their life. Again, I'm an optimist, but I do think it's really possible. We just have to be very intentional about where we focus our energy and what our goal is.

Ellen Kelsay

Well, Jennifer, thank you for an incredible conversation. You have really unparalleled and highly unique experience and perspective that is highly valuable to this audience. So, couldn't thank you enough for joining us in conversation. Greatly appreciate it.

Jennifer Posa

So good to chat with you again.

Ellen Kelsay

I've been speaking with Dr. Jennifer Posa about the value and importance of workforce well-being, especially as employers navigate high healthcare costs and highly fluid environments amid increasing scrutiny from leaders about the impact of well-being.

I'm Ellen Kelsey, and this podcast is produced by Business Group on Health, with Connected Social Media. If you liked the episode, please rate us and leave a review.