



SOCIOLOGY OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA

Education, Digital Divide, Work and Wellbeing

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Manoj Kumar Jena

CHAPTER IX

Covid-19 and Employee Wellbeing: A Systemic Ideation

– *Rajneesh Chowdhury*

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19, that started as a health crisis in late 2019, soon progressed in an insidious manner that caused unprecedented damage to humanity. Scores of lives lost prematurely, invisible opaque walls created between loved ones, millions of livelihoods eradicated, and years of the progress in the global economy undone. Covid-19 continues to pose grave threats to humanity. In parallel, the negative impact of Covid-19 has created an endemic mental health crisis with the world's population gripped with constant fear of infection, death, isolation, and deep personal loss. Organizations today are having to deal with a complete generation of workforce suffering from anxiety and depression emanating out of the effects of Covid-19. This has led organizations to rethink how they engage with their workforce and how they ensure a healthy work environment so that employees can contribute positively to business and to their own selves. Such developments have catalyzed employee wellbeing to come to the forefront in organization studies and practice in current times. Employee wellbeing is an overarching concept that can define an organization's engagement with its employees touching various dimensions that matter to people to ensure a

workforce that is physically and mentally healthy and that can positively contribute towards the organization's vision and performance. Given that a wide variety of factors need to be considered for the design and implementation of employee wellbeing initiatives, a systems approach needs to be adopted to appreciate how these dimensions come into play and how they need to be curated for the target audience. Systems thinking recognizes that an overall system draws its character and strength from the interrelationships between its subsystems and that the understanding of emergent patterns helps better organization management.

This chapter will begin by setting the background and context of the discussions. Employee wellbeing will be defined, and research will be cited that establishes its importance for business. This will be followed by a narration of the negative impact of Covid-19 on the workforce and how this has brought the importance of employee wellbeing to prominence for organizations. An argument will be introduced that establishes the importance of a systems approach for crafting employee wellbeing solutions. Next, a detailed discussion on systems thinking will be presented with an emphasis on Holistic Flexibility, a conceptual lens in systems practice in management science. Employee wellbeing will be positioned within the systems thinking paradigm. This will be followed by a case-study of RoundGlass, a global wellbeing company, that has adopted a systems approach to design and deploy a unique employee wellbeing solution. A narration of how the organization adapted its engagements with its employees, staying close to its vision, at the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic will be presented. Finally, a systemic ideation of the RoundGlass approach to employee wellbeing will be presented in light of the conceptual lens of Holistic Flexibility. The

ideation will surface key learning for organizations that want to set themselves in the path of enabling employee wellbeing.

The author of this chapter was part of the team that worked with the Founder and the Leader of People & Culture (the function responsible for human resource management) of RoundGlass in articulating the RoundGlass approach to wellbeing.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Employee wellbeing refers to policies and practices initiated by an organization to ensure that employees are able to navigate their life challenges with a growth mindset that can empower them to live their lives with greater satisfaction, joy, and fulfilment as part of their professional journey. Employee wellbeing is a business imperative and initiatives pertaining to the same must be driven by an organization's leadership and spearheaded by the Human Resources (HR) function or a dedicated wellbeing team. Design and implementation of wellbeing programs must be integrated into employee systems and processes. Wellbeing programs facilitate the provision of an environment that is conducive for the growth of autonomy, relationships, and competence of employees and it directly addresses the innate psychological needs of people to improve their functioning at the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Employee wellbeing has been gaining attention as an important area of research in the context of organizational performance, given that several studies have pointed out to its positive correlation with job results, job engagement, and job satisfaction (Krekel et al 2021; Meister, 2021). Recently, Krekel, et al (2021) analyzed 339 independent research studies that were accumulated by Gallup, a leading global research and consultancy firm, that included wellbeing data of 1,882,131

employees and the performance of 82,248 business units originating from 230 independent organizations across 49 industries in 73 countries. The study concluded that there is a positive correlation between employee wellbeing and productivity. Further, experimental evidence suggests that targeted investments in employee wellbeing can yield an average increase in productivity of about 10% (Kerkeel, et. al., 2021). Cemazar (2020) talks about a range of benefits of investing in employee wellbeing that includes reduction in absenteeism, increase in employee engagement, improved employee productivity, improved employee morale, and finally, an enhanced employer brand.

Having introduced employee wellbeing, the next section will elaborate on how the severe blow posed to the global workforce by the Covid-19 pandemic directly led to a wellbeing crisis in organizations.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORKFORCE

The devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were felt in all aspects of life, and it brought the world to a state of shock. Lockdowns, social (more appropriately “physical”) distancing, work from home, and isolation became the norm. The pandemic had tremendous negative effect on the society on several fronts. Social and physical isolation is itself an antithesis to the very basic need of human beings to come together, interact at a personal level, form bonds, and create communities. Developing countries struggled as they grappled with the economic inability to impose full lockdown, misinformation about the virus, and lack of adequate healthcare facilities (Blake & Wadhwa, not; 2020; Goel, et al 2021).

“The Covid-19 recession is singular in many respects and is likely to be the deepest one in advanced economies since the Second World War and the first output contraction in emerging and developing economies in at least the past six decades” ... Ayhan Kose, Director of the World Bank Prospects Group (2020).

The combined effect of the challenges posed by Covid-19 hit the global workforce with a grave crisis of wellbeing. Millions of employees were put on government-supported job retention schemes in wealthy countries, and in the developing and underdeveloped world, millions were put out of work resulting in a mass of the new poor (Jones et al 2021). The employed saw dramatic shifts in their working lives that included remote working, rapid digital adoption, and a sudden co-invasion between personal and professional dimensions. Many employees were not prepared in terms of work infrastructure at home that resulted in an ergonomic crisis of people having to sit for long hours in front of their computers in wrong postures and with inadequate facilities leading to muscular aches and long-lasting sprains. Many continued working while they were suffering from Covid-19 as they feared that prolonged sick leaves might cost them their jobs or would land them with a poor performance review. Covid-19 disrupted the very fragment of a stable life. Social connections formed at the workplace completely broke down resulting in professional loneliness and alienation. Such developments led to a parallel mental health pandemic gripping people with their inability to cope with loss of loved ones, their own health risks, social isolation, and workplace stress.

As organizations begin to bounce back with a generation of employees that was never prepared for anything like this, the modes of engagement between organizations and their people

will need to change. The experience through this pandemic can shed valuable light on how organizations need to redefine their relationship with employees. Experiences through the pandemic have taught organizations that legacy approaches to employment terms, payment and benefits contracts, employee satisfaction, and employee lifecycle management will need to undergo a dramatic shift with a focus on creating employee wellbeing, a subject that rapidly gained prominence in the backdrop of the pandemic – this is taken up in the next section.

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING IN PROMINENCE

Covid-19 brought employee wellbeing to prominence as a C-suite priority for organizations along with business results and stock market performance (Alberts, 2021). Leaders have realized that for organizations to demonstrate high performance, employees need to be in good overall health, and they need to be looked after to ensure the same. The Wellbeing at Work Survey (2021), that was conducted by RoundGlass covering 400 organizations in India, came up with some positive findings about how corporate India responded to its wellbeing needs during 2020 to 2021, when the pandemic was at its peak. 61 per cent of the organizations were found to conduct awareness sessions and workshops on mental health and wellbeing, 51 per cent held mindfulness and meditation sessions, and 44 per cent offered stress management support through employee assistance programs. Several wellbeing apps gained popularity in organizations very rapidly in the recent past. Organizations are experimenting with innovative initiatives to extend wellbeing support to their employees. Awasthi (2021) and Nashkar (2021) highlight several examples from organizations in India that launched new practices to promote employee wellbeing. Such practices

include company-wide breaks from work, promotion of physical and mental fitness through social media, and financial support to help employees cope with personal loss and economic hardships. According to Seth (2021), many organizations are taking such efforts further to support employees beyond health, medical, and financial benefits, and they are taking steps to enhance team relationships and shared values in the virtual environment as an essential factor in building trust.

While the pandemic has certainly catapulted the need for employee wellbeing, it is important to note that a wellbeing approach should not be treated as a temporary reaction to a crisis caused by the pandemic. Nor is it a superficial problem that can be addressed by downloading an app or by introducing ad-hoc leaves to get away from the work mode. Most organizations have resorted to models that are myopic in their approaches, and they tackle specific issues or symptoms and lose sight of the overall picture and ignore underlying causes of employee distress. Such approaches tend to be short-term and generic and hence, fail to make any real impact. For organizations to embark on the wellbeing journey, various factors need to be considered. Initiatives need to be at multiple levels – strategic, leadership, managerial, and staff – supported by reconsideration of HR policies and practices in a flexible and sustainable manner. For delivery of such initiatives, what also needs to be considered is a hybrid model incorporating both online and offline modes that addresses wellbeing both for an individual and a team, and finally, considering both the personal and professional conditions of an employee. To bring so many factors together, a systems thinking approach is required. The next section will introduce systems and its relevance to employee wellbeing.

SYSTEMS THINKING AND ITS RELEVANCE TO EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Systems thinking encourages us to approach problem situations critically considering how boundaries of a problem are defined, how interrelationships between the constituent subsystems within the boundary are understood, and how properties arising out of these interrelationships interact with other systems outside the defined boundaries, and finally, how emergent patterns emerge based on these interactions and interrelationships. Systems and their environments exist in an integrated manner influencing each other in ubiquitous open systems (Dutta, 2017; Hariharan et al 2021). Murthy (2000) notes, “the concept of a system is fundamental to many sciences” (p. 87). The idea of the world and the cosmos as a dynamic system is also strong in Eastern mystical traditions (Chowdhury, 2019a; Chowdhury, 2022a).

Systems thinking took a strong grip in management with the works of leading scholars (Bateson, 1979; Gregory & Ronan, 2015; Jackson, 2000, 2003, 2019; Reed, 1992; Senge, et. al., 1994; Sparrow, 1998; Starbuck & Mezias, 1996; Ulanowicz, 1986) who emphasized on understanding complex situations with a holistic and critical mindset. These scholars introduced various methodologies to address complex problems. Latest research in the subject argues for systems thinking to be a cognitive skill and calls for greater flexibility, democratization, and egalitarianism of the discipline (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2019; Chowdhury, 2019a,b, 2020; Chowdhury, 2022b Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2021; Rajagopalan, 2020). The author of this chapter visited key debates in systems research and undertook an analysis of empirical cases in applied systems thinking and presented Holistic Flexibility as a conceptual lens for managers to practice systems thinking

(Chowdhury, 2019a, 2020) on a regular basis without having to be guided by specific methodologies. Holistic Flexibility is defined as the dynamic interplay between a state of mind that has the ability to absorb systemic complexity and a state of practice that has the ability to embrace flexibility both in intent and in form. Holistic Flexibility argues for a pragmatic stance in systems thinking emphasizing on a manager’s ability to seamlessly manage and work with multiple variables, stakeholders, and factors to deliver responsible outcomes with the aid of learning loops. Holistic Flexibility is not a methodology; rather, it is a conceptual lens for managers that can offer them intellectual, emotional, and tactical elasticity in management practice. Holistic Flexibility makes an appeal to managers to be open to making use of various types of thinking, reasoning, and doing; of anticipating, creating, and negotiating; of managing, enabling, and facilitating; of investigating, modelling, and analyzing.

The five main building blocks of Holistic Flexibility are holistic thinking, flexibility, learning, responsible outcomes, and pragmatic practice. A brief description of each of these building blocks is provided below; for a detailed reading of the same, the reader should refer to Chowdhury (2019a, 2022a).

Holistic thinking: The ability to transcend a modular approach to problems by approaching systemic boundaries critically and considering them to be contextual and in a state of evolution. Further, the interrelationships between the various sub-systems within the evolving system are also dynamic and evolutionary. This leads to the emergence of a situation as a continual representation of perceived reality from one state to another.

Flexibility: Holistic thinking has a consummate relationship with flexibility. As a system evolves with its

dynamic boundaries, a manager needs to display three kinds of flexibility to adapt to it: cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to think flexibly; formulative flexibility, which is the application of a variety of methodologies that enable flexible and adaptive practice; and substantive flexibility, which is the access to resource alternatives that can bring flexible practice to life.

Responsible outcomes: A manager must aspire for systemic value addition – social, economic, and environmental – in their area of work. Additionally, they must endeavor to emancipate the situation of stakeholders through practices that are inclusive, participatory, and empowering. Finally, they must provide solutions that are sustainable.

Learning: A manager and an organization must continually learn and adapt to changing circumstances, expectations, and complexities. Learning is central to the dynamic interplay between holistic thinking and flexibility. Learning can be typified as single-loop learning (are we doing things right?), double-loop learning (are we doing the right things?), and triple-loop learning (why are we doing what we are doing?).

Pragmatic practice: A manager needs to pragmatically bring together the above four building blocks with focus, dedication, direction, and practice. They must hone certain demonstrable traits that include being open to challenge, questioning conventional paradigms, being ready to embrace diversity, and shifting between thinking and acting with seamlessness and tenacity.

The above building blocks were crystallized and articulated as principles of Holistic Flexibility in the author's most recent research on the subject (Chowdhury, 2022a).

Holistic Flexibility for organizational theory lets the floor open for understanding of boundaries critically inside and outside the organization, appreciating problem-structuring rather than jumping into problem-solving, and emphasizing on employee empowerment. It can lend a powerful lens to the design and implementation of employee wellbeing solutions with an alternative perspective to that that advocates employees to be considered within esoteric organizational structures that exist in isolation. Employees are individuals, they exist in an organizational context and within a larger societal milieu. Successfully designing and implementing people-related programs call for an ability to systemically comprehend problem situations. Managing people in organizations is not an administrative function, but it is a humanistic one (Chowdhury, 2019b). Application of systems thinking to employee wellbeing means that we draw synergies between people, process, and technology for the delivery of solutions in the wider context of the problem and at the same time, pre-empt and prepare for emergent behavior of the system.

In the context of employee wellbeing, systems thinking directs us to consider an employee as an individual who exists at an intersection of several factors and how this can position them in the context of the organization, their everyday work, and their personal and social lives. It is true that Covid-19 has triggered the uptake of employee wellbeing programs, but it is certainly not true that it has created this need for the first time. A systemic framework for employee wellbeing lifts the focus from finding a quick-fix solution to employee anxiety during the pandemic to framing a holistic and long-term approach to ensure the health, happiness, and engagement of individuals in organizations for the long haul.

The next section will present a case-study of how RoundGlass, a global wellbeing company, has embraced

employee wellbeing in a systemic manner and how it adapted itself to the challenges of the new realities posed by Covid-19. The author of this chapter was part of the team that worked closely with the Founder and the Leader of People & Culture (P&C) (the function responsible for human resource management) of RoundGlass to frame its overall approach to wellbeing between 2019 and 2021.

ROUNDGLASS EMPLOYEE WELLBEING CASE-STUDY

RoundGlass is a global wellbeing company that aims to revolutionize people's lives through a holistic⁷⁵ approach to wellbeing. It was founded by Sunny (Gurpreet) Singh – an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and wellbeing champion – in 2014 with the ambitious mission to inspire people to embrace holistic wellbeing, creating a happier, healthier, and more joyful world for all. Currently, RoundGlass is powered by over 550 passionate associates⁷⁶ mainly based in the US and India.

“Wellbeing is a state of health and contentment which allows individuals, communities, and the planet to thrive. This requires lifestyle choices which are balanced, meaningful, and life affirming — so that one's life becomes a journey of wellbeing” ... Sunny Singh, Founder – RoundGlass.

The purpose of RoundGlass is encapsulated under the following categories:

⁷⁵RoundGlass spells “holistic” with a “w” to emphasize the wholeness and capaciousness of wellbeing as well as the wholeness one experiences when one lives such a purposeful life that touches all the dimensions of human wellbeing. For this case-study of RoundGlass, the spelling “holistic” is used.

⁷⁶At RoundGlass, employees are referred to as associates. The term “associate” will be used while presenting this case study.

1. **Happiness:** Refers to the aspects of our mental wellbeing, including emotional and intellectual qualities of our mental world. Everything from managing difficult emotions, coping with loss, reducing stress and anxiety to increasing our dispositions of acceptance, self-compassion, self-love, and prosocial behaviors contributes to happiness.

2. **Health:** Refers to our physical wellbeing, including how we nurture our body through getting and staying active, tending to sleep hygiene, healthy eating, recovering from stress and improving our maladaptive habits.

3. **Harmony:** Refers to our social, community, planetary, and spiritual wellbeing. How we connect with nature, nurture relationships, cultivate insight and wisdom and deepen our spirituality, all involve our purpose of finding harmony.

4. **Growth:** Refers to our professional and financial wellbeing. How we optimize our performance, find meaning in our work, develop our capabilities for reaching our fullest potential, and enhancing quality of life, all involve our purpose of targeting growth.

RoundGlass' work can be categorized under two main pillars – commercial and social. The commercial enterprise has a global focus, and it has three offerings — Living, Learning, and Cross. RoundGlass Living is designed to enable every individual to put holistic wellbeing at the core of their life's journey through solutions that include applications, experiences and content aimed at catalyzing conversations at the vanguard of the global wellbeing movement. RoundGlass Learning quips and inspires people to enjoy and excel in their learning journey, focusing on happy, healthy and holistic growth and development for all. RoundGlass Cross offers wellbeing teachers and practitioners an interconnected ecosystem through solutions that help capture, integrate, and streamline, disparate patient information, eliminate paperwork, and deliver care

seamlessly. The social enterprise has an India focus, and it has three arms – Sports, Foundation, and Sustain. RoundGlass Sports gives every child a chance to play by identifying and nurturing talent in football, hockey, and tennis. RoundGlass Foundation aims to restore wellbeing to 12,500 villages in the Indian State of Punjab through initiatives in education, livelihoods, women’s empowerment, crafts revival, green cover, organic farming, waste management, and disaster relief. RoundGlass Sustain works to enhance interest, respect, and love for India’s biodiversity by creating a comprehensive and media-rich record of India’s biodiversity and its conservation. Overall, RoundGlass embraces an eco-system and multistakeholder-based approach to enable holistic wellbeing to individuals, institutions, communities, and the planet.

With this introduction to RoundGlass, the next section will elaborate on the organization’s point of view on employee wellbeing.

ROUNDGLASS POINT OF VIEW ON EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

RoundGlass takes a holistic approach to wellbeing that encompasses eight key dimensions of an individual’s life. This is depicted in Figure 9.1. These dimensions are overarching for

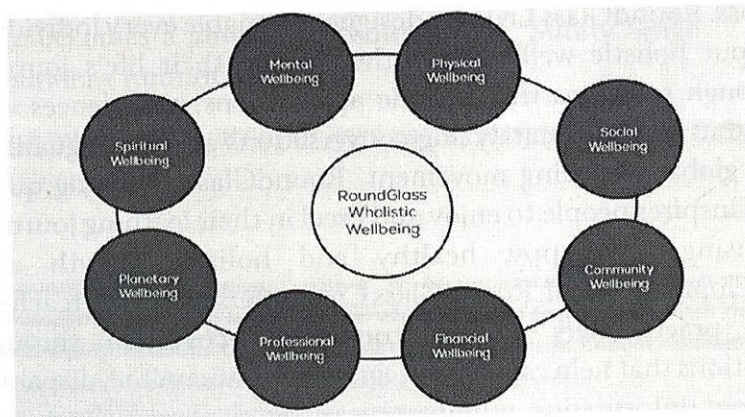


Figure 9.1: Eight dimension of RoundGlass Holistic Wellbeing

RoundGlass for all its initiatives across its commercial and social enterprises, and its own organizational functioning.

The eight dimensions are explained below, categorized in hierarchical fashion, from the standpoint of associate wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing: Refers to healthy habits of thinking and emotion. How associates feel, think, and act in the world contribute to their capacity for a healthy mental life, including sound decision-making, self-regulation, and self-control. By combating stress, anxiety, and depression, mental wellbeing has a large impact on an associate’s ability to contribute to their role with focus.

Physical wellbeing: Refers to a healthy, balanced, and optimal functioning body characterized by the healthy habits of regular exercise, good diet, good sleep, and eating well, as well as through low-risk factors for physical ailments and disease. It helps associates bring good energy to the workplace every day and contribute positively to work.

Social wellbeing: Refers to social, communal, and individual connectedness, including a broadening social circle and the feeling of safety, trust, and kinship. Spending time with family, associating more informally with colleagues, and feeling part of a safe and connected social circle help to nurture and develop social wellbeing that also enhances an associate’s ability to cope with crisis.

Community wellbeing: Refers to the realization of one’s existence as something bigger than the self. It enhances empathic concern, perspective taking, reciprocity, and altruistic motivations like kindness and compassion in associates. Active participation in one’s community, such as volunteering time, talent, and expertise to better humanity are critical to a healthy society.

Financial wellbeing: Refers to a state of being wherein a person can fully meet current and ongoing financial obligations, feel secure in their financial future, and is able to make choices that allow them to enjoy life. It means that associates are able to live, plan, and adapt in changing times while having the financial freedom to make choices contributing to life enjoyment.

Professional wellbeing: Refers to being secure and satisfied with one's career path and work environment. It involves a feeling of work-life balance, engagement through purpose/meaning, and feeling valued for one's contributions. This domain also focuses on nurturing diversity, equity, and inclusion for associates.

Planetary wellbeing: Refers to the wellbeing of society embedded in its natural environmental surroundings and the planet at large. It involves awareness, respect, and sustainability of good practices towards one's local environment, natural resources, and the planet as a whole, thus encouraging associates to act to protect the earth's wealth and diversity.

Spiritual wellbeing: Refers to a level of connection to a purpose or energy greater than oneself, also known as self-transcendence. This involves cultivating faith in a higher power, and/or connection to a faith that provides solace in times of challenge or uncertainty. It aids in associates' ability to cultivate a more resilient, peaceful, and fulfilling self.

Having talked about the eight dimensions of RoundGlass holistic wellbeing from the standpoint of associate wellbeing, the next section will elaborate how the same is deployed in the organization.

ROUNDGLASS ASSOCIATE WELLBEING IN PRACTICE

RoundGlass has introduced a range of initiatives across its eight dimensions of holistic wellbeing. These initiatives have evolved

over the years into a healthy mix of services and facilities for associates offered throughout the year. A flavor of the same is provided below in. This list is not exhaustive and some of the initiatives may not be inclusive of both India and the US, and they have been framed keeping in mind local needs, country-specific employment regulations, and available facilities in the respective office premise.

Mental wellbeing:

- Meditation and mindfulness
- Awareness drives for mental health
- Access to wellbeing facilities and sessions during work time
- Time-off and holidays aligned to organizational wellbeing priorities
- Worry-free time-off for significant life events
- Flexible work schedules

Physical wellbeing:

- Organic snacks, beverages, and meals
- In-house gym and fitness classes
- Onsite yoga sessions for bodily flexibility and boosting immunity
- Massages for musculoskeletal health, apart from relaxation
- Holistic chronic disease management programs
- Standing/adjustable workstations

Social Wellbeing:

- Community-building area, recreation room, and sports ground
- Daily communal refreshments
- Community promotion of healthy food choices, and teaching nutritious and delicious recipes

- Associate and family socialization
- Local opportunities for pro sporting events, Sip & Paint, etc.

Community wellbeing:

- Dedicated Foundation serving over 12,000 villages in Punjab in India
- Financial assistance for associates performing civic duty
- Volunteering schemes and volunteering days for associates
- Digital platforms for donations for social causes
- Community fund-raising for disaster relief

Financial wellbeing:

- Cost-effective medical care benefits for associates and their dependents
- Tax-favored financial saving instruments
- Dental and vision care benefits for associates and their dependents
- Life insurance for associates and their loved ones

Professional wellbeing:

- Self-directed online learning sessions
- Associate recognition for contributions above and beyond their regular work
- Transparent systems of reporting, career path, and overall wellbeing plan
- Regular connects between senior leadership and employees
- Team-level connects to align on functional priorities and expected contributions

Planetary wellbeing:

- Energy efficient office environment

- Waste segregation and recycling initiatives
- Campaigns for associates to provide opportunities to do good for the environment
- Education sessions on importance of sustainability
- Social media campaigns promoting rich Indian biodiversity

Spiritual wellbeing:⁷⁷

- Content based on finding meaning and purpose
- Practices for connecting to a sense of oneness and unity
- Spiritual guidance for higher awakening and self-transcendence
- Chakra healing
- One-to-one spiritual mentorship

Table 9.1: Examples of RoundGlass associate wellbeing initiatives.

RoundGlass has a two-fold execution approach for its initiatives focusing on the organization, in general, and on individual associates, in specific. The initiatives are designed and adapted depending on what is relevant to a particular context and from feedback collected from associates from time to time. Group sessions for yoga, collective meditation, and awareness campaigns for health, community, and the environment are typical examples of organization-wide initiatives. At the same time, RoundGlass recognizes that every associate is also an individual with their unique needs and, therefore, their wellbeing goals are also different.

“Associate wellbeing cannot be divorced from individual wellbeing. We look at every associate’s individual

⁷⁷At the time of writing this chapter, Spiritual Wellbeing was being designed to be rolled out in the organization at a later date.

wellbeing goals and learning styles and accordingly offer solutions that are authentic and holistic” ... Shiraj Chakraborty – Leader, P&C – RoundGlass.

RoundGlass has introduced flexible approaches for associates who may require personalized programs. A scientific approach is adopted for curating initiatives at an individual level starting with a wellbeing assessment leading to the crafting of an associate wellbeing plan, execution of the same enabled by qualified professionals, and finally, assessment of impact of the initiative on the associate.

Pathways have been curated for associates to embark on their wellbeing journey and navigate to content through a particular practice of interest. These pathways include:

- Meditation and mindfulness
- Yoga
- Fitness
- Martial arts
- Healthy eating
- Integrative therapy
- Knowledge and wisdom
- Rituals and ceremonies

Following are some of the hallmarks of the RoundGlass associate wellbeing deployment strategy:

- Associate wellbeing is considered as a priority in the overall business strategy
- Inputs from associates across levels are incorporated to cater to their needs
- Wellbeing initiatives involve all business functions, teams, and levels
- Initiatives are personalized for individual associate needs when/where required

- Initiatives are driven by a structure and plan for efficient delivery
- Initiatives are documented and publicized
- Managers are sensitized to encourage their teams to avail of wellbeing programs
- A dedicated wellbeing team has been appointed and a wellbeing budget has been allocated
- Digital technology is leveraged to enable the initiatives
- Impact of wellbeing initiatives is measured for learning and making improvements

RoundGlass’ concerted efforts have made wellbeing a culture in the organization rather than being just a vision. Covid-19 brought about significant disruptions in the employee wellbeing initiatives at RoundGlass for which, the organization had to make several adaptations and introduce new initiatives to cater to the new realities that the organization and its people faced. This is discussed in the next section.

ADAPTATIONS AND INITIATIVES INTRODUCED DURING COVID-19

RoundGlass was prompt to respond to the new challenges posed by Covid-19. The following discussion highlights the adaptations made in the existing initiatives and the new initiatives introduced, categorized under three general modes of responses. Several of these adaptations will be continued in the future as well, for which present-tense will be used in selected places in the following discussion. Various new initiatives were introduced on a virtual model; many of these are expected to move to an in-person or a hybrid model in the future.

Mode of business: RoundGlass declared mandatory work

from home for all associates in March 2020, well before Covid-19 assumed pandemic proportions. Delivery of all projects was moved to a virtual mode. Several businesses across the world experimented with opening their offices when the effect of the first wave was waning down, but soon to announce one more stint of virtual working advisory. RoundGlass was, however, determined to keep its offices closed through the entire time of the pandemic. During the virtual working period, no time-tracking of associates was undertaken. The focus was on due completion of work with the expectation that associates would be prudent and authentic.

RoundGlass leveraged technology to enable virtual working. Associates were supported with laptops and internet connection so that they could work from any location of their choice, even outside the country of their office location. International associates were supported with travel back to their home countries to be with their families. Access was given to associates to official Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype platforms for them to stay in touch with their colleagues and participate in all required meetings. Meetings were fixed at a time that is convenient for participants considering their time zone.

RoundGlass stepped up its Covid-19 relief work in the villages of Punjab in India. Associates, who were directly involved in extending the relief initiatives, went back to specific sites for deployment of the same. Examples of relief work included ration support to needy villagers, awareness generation of Covid-19 and its related protocols, and sharing information about public health centers. Detailed Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) were created for associates to follow while they ventured out to the field. This was done in collaboration with qualified infectious

disease experts. Safety of associates was the top priority. The expertise of the organization gained through its disaster relief work was later incorporated as a specialized offering within the RoundGlass Foundation.

As the business transitioned to a virtual mode amidst a time that tested the associates' resilience, RoundGlass also reconsidered how it looks at performance and accountability at work. Upholding wellbeing as the primary agenda, RoundGlass rewired its traditional performance conversations between managers and teams to professional wellbeing conversations. Professional wellbeing conversations were driven by two shifts: (i) Shift from promotion to progression – these conversations do not focus on promoting an associate from one level to the next, but on how an associate has progressed from one stage of competency to the next. This is about building higher capability and skills essential for an associate to deal with greater complexity and challenges of both their personal and professional life. (ii) Shift from deficit to abundance – these conversations do not remind an associate about what they lack, they rather reinforce for an associate what their strengths are. While a conversation of deficit leads to anxiety and lack of self-confidence, a conversation of abundance reiterates what an associate is good at and how this quality can be strengthened further. However, this, in no way, means that individual and team accountabilities are compromised. The P&C function drives a culture where managerial capability is built in a way where both sensibility and sensitivity are cherished.

Finally, it is to be noted that RoundGlass reprioritized its business goals for 2021 to respond to the demands of its times. The organization invested heavily on acquiring

senior leadership talent through 2019 and 2020 with the idea that it would crystallize its new business verticals in 2021 and set in motion new products, segments, and markets. However, due to the testing times posed by the pandemic, the executive leadership decided that for 2021, the organization would make associate wellbeing its top priority. Even through some of the most difficult times, there were no lay-offs and pay hikes were awarded as per industry standards.

Mode of engagement: With changes in the mode of business, RoundGlass introduced a series of adaptations in the way in which the organization engages with its people, leaders communicate with their teams, and colleagues interact between themselves.

RoundGlass introduced a fully paid *wellbeing time-off* for associates who are affected by Covid-19. Anyone who tests positive or has to care for a loved one who tests positive is allowed as much time as they need to recover or care and reframe themselves before getting back to work. Associates can center their work around their personal lives and not the other way round. Covid-19 care took center stage.

Circle Ups were introduced for managers to connect directly with their team members at regular intervals. These one-on-one sessions are meant to elevate conversations between managers and team members from work-related updates to establishing personal connections. The idea is to shift conversation from “What was done last week?” to “How are you doing?”. *Circle Ups* are created with the idea that if there is personal trust and rapport between the associates, work will always get done. During the trying times of the pandemic, personal trust and rapport are prioritized as the key elements of professional wellbeing.

The Founder’s forum for associates, *Conversations with Sunny*, was made more frequent than earlier, which was held once in every six weeks, to during the pandemic, when it has been made once in every two weeks. This forum is an opportunity for all associates to hear directly from their Founder about how the company is doing, how it is enabling wellbeing for its people, community, and the planet during an extremely tough time, and how the organization is committed to stand by its associates through thick and thin. Associates are given the opportunity to ask anything to their Founder real time, or submit questions in advance, or seek further clarifications post the sessions. As the sessions progressed, the forum has been made more inclusive and the Founder invites leaders from the business units to talk about how their respective business units are doing and how this is connected with the overall organizational vision. Associate feedback indicated various benefits of the forum for them, which include greater clarity in the business, enhanced trust in the organization, and better brand affinity.

Joyful Fridays were introduced as a weekly forum for associates to connect within and across functions informally and joyfully and help build a culture of bonhomie, trust, and mutual empathy. This forum is grounded on human experience principles and which, in turn, drives sustainable change at behavioral, cultural, and organizational levels. Conversations in this forum are strictly not about work. *Joyful Fridays* are voluntary sessions conducted by business units to which, selected members from other business units can be invited to participate. Topics of discussion include movies, shows, hobbies, holidays, sports, art and culture, overall wellbeing, and

pets, among others. Sessions can also be activity oriented – e.g., preparing a dish/ making a cocktail/ singing and playing a musical instrument/ reciting a poem/ guiding a meditation session/ etc. Family members and pets are welcome to join.

Several tactical changes have been introduced keeping in mind the emotional, professional, and social wellbeing of associates. Fridays are designated to be days where no review meetings are conducted unless it is extremely critical. Further, no late-night meetings are held. If time zones need to be synced, then a friendly time slot is fixed that does not compel participants to keep awake very late at night or be ready for a meeting at dawn. Finally, managers are sensitized to be more considerate of their team members taking breaks during work hours and be respectful of work-life boundaries.

Mode of support: RoundGlass empathized with the stress and anxiety that associates were going through during the pandemic. This further emphasized for the organization, the importance of providing wellbeing initiatives with adaptations and flexibility that are required in response to the restrictions with in-person engagement. Initiatives such as guided meditation, stress busting practices, yoga, posture, physical exercise, and sound bath, among others, were moved online. New sessions that cater specifically to the challenges posed by the testing times were introduced such as nutrition for immunity, good practices for managing Covid-19 at home, dealing with stress, motivating and engaging with kids who are home bound, caring for the elderly, dealing with loss and death, cooking healthy meals, and managing lifestyle illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, etc. Several hacks are organized focusing on physical and mental wellbeing such

as high-intensity practice-led sessions conducted by experts. RoundGlass already has a range of in-house experts trained to conduct such sessions. In cases where external expertise is required, the organization goes the extra mile to contract with external specialists for the delivery of programs to ensure that all sessions are delivered at a world-class level.

Members of the RoundGlass P&C team are available round the clock to talk to any associate who may need support or guidance – both emotional and Covid-19 management related. The P&C team proactively keeps in touch with associates who are directly affected by Covid-19.

Financial wellbeing for associates was reprioritized. A direct outcome of this was the inclusion of parental cover in the corporate associate insurance scheme. A life term cover was also added for personal exigencies associated with any infections relating to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes (SARS). It is notable that these changes were made at a time when the industry was grappling with unprecedentedly high insurance cover costs. Such humanistic steps taken by RoundGlass helped bring in better financial stability and security for its associates.

During the harsh and inhuman second wave of the pandemic that struck India during early 2021, RoundGlass set up resource centers for associates and their families in India. These resource centers collated credible information on support systems such as medicines, hospitals, oxygen cylinders, ventilators, ambulances, and emergency care. The services of the resource centers were also offered for the villages in Punjab where RoundGlass has a presence. During the time when India was going through a serious scarcity of ventilators, the organization even started the

procurement process to import ventilator machines and make it available to needy associates. However, finally, the required machines could be procured locally.

Through the three modes of responding to the pandemic, RoundGlass had to unlearn pre-set assumptions and challenge existing mental models of conducting business. It was essential to adopt a mindset that lets the organization to be open, vulnerable, humble, and accommodative to truly function effectively as a complex adaptive process.

Having presented the RoundGlass employee wellbeing case-study, the next section will present a systemic ideation of the same.

A SYSTEMIC IDEATION OF ROUNDGLASS EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

A systemic ideation of the RoundGlass approach to employee wellbeing will be presented as it aligns to the five building blocks of the conceptual lens of Holistic Flexibility (discussed in section 3).

Holistic thinking: Challenging and redefining traditional boundaries of wellbeing to make it more relevant to employees as individuals is the hallmark of the RoundGlass approach. The RoundGlass Wellbeing At Work Survey (2020) report presents a well-researched model of how organizations approach wellbeing on a spectrum starting with health (covering education on non-communicable diseases, doctor consultations and health awareness), progressing to fitness (covering physical fitness classes, and sports, in addition to what is covered under health), progressing to wellness (covering mindfulness, yoga, disease management and stress management, in addition to what is covered under fitness), and finally, progressing to wellbeing (covering all the eight

dimensions of holistic wellbeing articulated by RoundGlass). RoundGlass treats the eight dimensions as interrelated and, therefore, recognizes the power of them fusing together for the holistic wellbeing of its employees. This fusion is treated as a progressive process, which means that it constantly challenges any saturation of the concept itself or of its initiatives. Therefore, the model is constantly evolving, with spiritual wellbeing being the latest dimension that was added during the time this chapter was written. The genesis of the organization in 2014 – much before Covid-19 hit the world – with a purpose to enable holistic wellbeing for people, planet, and the society is itself a testament to the organization's ability to think holistically, push boundaries, and embrace newness in thinking.

Flexibility: RoundGlass' adoption of flexibility in its approach can be considered in two ways: (i) first, in terms of customization of initiatives (Wellbeing initiatives are provided both at the collective and at the individual levels. The individual level is guided by a thorough process that helps the customization to be unique); and (ii) second, in terms of its ability to adapt during the pandemic (When the pandemic hit, the organization was promptly able to shift several of its initiatives online. It also enhanced its emphasis on certain initiatives that touches specific dimensions of holistic wellbeing in a way that is relevant to the situation). The realities posed by the pandemic, especially the deadly second wave in India, put before the executive leadership grave challenges for which, no amount of planning could have sufficed. However, it was the organization's ability to challenge pre-existing model models, application of collective expertise drawn from inside and outside the organization, ability to adapt plans on-the-go, and being able to make financial,

infrastructure, and equipment resources available flexibly that made deployment of plans for the organization seamless and as a complex adaptive process. All the three kinds of flexibility – cognitive, formulative, and substantive – were demonstrated by the organization in real time.

Responsible outcomes: RoundGlass stands out as a unique example of an organization that is built on the sole purpose of enabling wellbeing for individuals, professionals, organizations, communities, and the planet. This is an immensely responsible approach to create a happier and a more joyful world and aligns with the elements of systemic value-add under responsible outcomes. When the pandemic struck, the organization was able to prioritize human interests for employees and the community equally and displayed tremendous sense of responsibility with the practices it adopted. RoundGlass' focus on selfless disaster relief and employee wellbeing during the pandemic was testament to the organization's commitment to emancipate people from suffering and alienation. Moreover, the very fact that the organization incorporated disaster relief as a specialized offering within its Foundation, after its experience with its Covid-19 response, demonstrates its commitment to work in this area in a sustained manner. Similarly, several of the initiatives introduced for employees, as a response to the pandemic, will be continued in the future. Finally, RoundGlass adopts an inclusive and participatory multi-stakeholder approach in the design and implementation of its initiatives ensuring that the responsible outcomes it strives for are relevant, sustained, and empowering.

Learning: RoundGlass displayed a learning attitude through its journey of bringing holistic wellbeing to its stakeholders. Single-loop learning was displayed in the way

measurement is built into its wellbeing initiatives that enables efficient delivery of facilities and experiences. Corrective action is central to such delivery ensuring that appointments are maintained, facilities are adequately staffed and accessible, and experiences are provided in a highly professional environment. Double-loop learning was displayed by the organization in its practice of continually updating its services and inducting service delivery staff who are qualified and experienced to deliver employee delight. Triple-loop learning was displayed aptly with the very genesis of the organizational vision itself that is to bring holistic wellbeing to the world. RoundGlass recognized early on that for its business to be successful, its employees need to be regarded as the primary stakeholder. This is central to the purpose of existence of the organization. Finally, it is important to note that unlearning and contrarian thinking were upheld as the organization treaded this journey. This demonstrates the executive leadership's ability to stay nimble and take risks – qualities that provided foundational strength in the organization's learning journey.

Pragmatic practice: RoundGlass' strategy and deployment of its initiatives reflect a pragmatic stance that brings to its employees what is relevant and practical for them rather than what looks good. The RoundGlass vision is not something that is framed and hung on the wall, but it is brought to its employees in very real, relatable, and practical terms. The flexible stance reflected in the way the initiatives are designed and deployed, and in the adaptability of the initiatives as per the needs of the situation demonstrates that the organization believes in pragmatically transforming its ideas into action for the benefit of its people without getting limited by pre-agreed plans and pre-set budgetary allocations. The executive leadership and the P&C function of the organization

effectively bring together the competencies required for holistic thinking, flexibility, responsible outcomes, and learning to provide meaning for its employees and a sense of stability even at most testing times. This pragmatic stance adopted by RoundGlass has also helped to democratize the concept of holistic wellbeing for its employees. Needless to say, all of this would not have been possible without the resilience and commitment showed by the employees themselves through the journey.

While winding up this section, retrospectively, three axes surface as a foundational direction for the design and implementation of a systemic employee wellbeing solution for the industry: (i) horizontal – concrete and objectifiable factors that can help an employee position themselves in the predominantly *wider* scheme of a happy and stable life; (ii) vertical – subjective and intuitive factors that can help an employee position themselves in the predominantly *deeper* scheme of self-existence in relation to the wider cosmos; (iii) lateral – factors that can help an employee deal with unexpected and impeding crises that may hit their lives, in which their employer is also vested. These three axes should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Developing such a systemic solution for employee wellbeing can be reserved for another discussion.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a case for employee wellbeing in organizations. Employee wellbeing is an overarching concept that can define an organization's engagement with its employees touching various dimensions that matter to people to ensure a workforce that is physically and mentally healthy and that can positively contribute towards its vision and performance. It was argued that wellbeing is not just good to

have but can be an important business imperative. The discussion was contextualized within the unprecedented realities posed by the Covid-19 pandemic that posited grave challenges for societies, businesses, and working professionals. It was argued that due to the multiple factors and complexities that the topic entail, a systems approach is necessary to design and deploy employee wellbeing initiatives. Systems thinking recognizes that an overall system draws its character and strength from the interrelationships between its subsystems and that understanding of emergent patterns helps better organization management. A recently developed conceptual called Holistic Flexibility was introduced, which argues for a pragmatic and cognitive stance in systems thinking. This was followed by a detailed employee wellbeing case-study of an organization called RoundGlass. RoundGlass has a unique approach to employee wellbeing that encompasses eight dimensions of wellbeing – mental, physical, social, community, financial, professional, planetary, and spiritual. The discussion included how RoundGlass responded to the grave challenges posed by Covid-19, which were categorized under three modes – mode of business, mode of engagement, and mode of support. A systemic ideation of the RoundGlass approach to employee wellbeing was presented, which was aligned to the five building blocks of Holistic Flexibility – holistic thinking, flexibility, responsible outcomes, learning, and pragmatic practice. Finally, a reference was made on how learning from the discussions presented can lead to a new understanding for the potential development of a systemic solution for employee wellbeing for the industry, in general.

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