

# Leading for wellbeing through Covid-19



**GLWS**<sup>®</sup>  
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP WELLBEING SURVEY

&  
**thrive**  
ADVISORY

**PART 5: INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT & FLOW**

Through the lens of...



## Intellectual Engagement & Flow

Our intrinsic interest and focus in the work we do



### WorkingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our professional lives

#### Situation

Organisational, government and societal responses and shifts continue to have diverse and dramatic effects on a range of role-related elements that alter our intellectual engagement and flow including innovation, focus, development, autonomy, expertise and mastery. As organisations respond to COVID-19 from restructuring to slashing R&D and cancelling programs, leaders and employees are experiencing both unique challenges and opportunities. On the downside, these range from feeling overly stretched to intellectually under-utilised while others are coping with job loss and related loss of identity. On the upside, as we seek to exist betwixt and between the past and the future, exploring new and divergent ideas has become a necessity.



### LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

#### Situation

The shock and novelty factor of social distancing and virtual working is wearing off, leaving many people lamenting the loss of core freedoms. Home-schooling and other family care commitments are converging with work responsibilities, resulting in many struggling to find the time, energy and space for the other interests and activities that sustain and inspire them. With the bulk of work, social and familial interactions (and for many exercise/self-care) occurring by videoconference in confined spaces, our brains are struggling in new ways with such intensity and monotony. While current conditions clearly limit the possibilities for getting going with new ventures or projects, there are ways to take advantage and try new things and new skills.



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### Risks

- ⚠ With such unprecedented internal and external change occurring concurrently, typical organisational structures and decision-making processes have been up-ended and are operating in crisis mode, impacting the *autonomy, innovation and play to strengths* elements of the GLWS Working Well Intellectual Engagement and Flow aspect of wellbeing.
- ⚠ The ability to become completely immersed in creative endeavours and tasks that play to our strengths is known to be hindered by uncertainty, stress, anxiety and distraction, which continue to abound in the current environment.
- ⚠ Many leaders are still operating in crisis mode and attending crisis committee forums, resulting in protracted fight or flight stress response, impacting energy, creativity, focus and flow.
- ⚠ Work that requires in-person participation may have ground to a halt, resulting in many initiatives and projects being cancelled and postponed, leaving employees, contractors and consultants across most sectors at a stand-still, with unique experiences from financial concerns to the feeling that months or years of effort may be wasted or diluted.
- ⚠ Shifts to virtual working continue to impact the ability to feel engaged, alert and switched on as normal routines erode, employees may be confined to smaller, shared spaces at home and some may have more limited breaks, sun, fresh air and physical activity.
- ⚠ As many organisations are still deciphering how to respond to current economic impact and uncertainty, many employees have not yet had their job security confirmed for the foreseeable future, resulting in concerns and anxiety regarding immediate financial security.
- ⚠ Budgets and headcount for R&D and innovation initiatives are being slashed or frozen, as short-term business-critical imperatives take centre-stage, impacting those in these innovation functions and creating a ripple effect on the culture of creativity and innovation across organisations.



## LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

### Risks

- ⚠ Stress stymies mental energy and creativity. Overloaded circuits coupled with constant distractions and disruptions are leaving many feeling that 'being in the zone' on any tasks for an extended period is almost impossible, resulting in a lack of satisfaction related to completion and mastery of tasks.
- ⚠ COVID-19 is resulting in boundaries between work and life blurring more than ever, leading to ramifications for key elements of focus, flow, creativity, mastery and the pursuit of non-work-related intellectual endeavours.
- ⚠ Demands on time and energy have increased dramatically for some and decreased dramatically for others, resulting in widely disparate experiences and needs, with many feeling frenzied and overwhelmed and others feeling isolated and bored.
- ⚠ Being stretched across diverse tasks runs the risk of individuals feeling nothing is getting the attention and focus deserved and required. Expectation management has not been reset amidst COVID-19 leaving many (most notably perfectionists and pleasers) struggling to manage self and other expectations and apply a type of 80/20 rule on personal and professional output.
- ⚠ Working parents are reporting they are 'flailing and failing' in both arenas of responsibilities; home schooling is feeling impossible for full-time working parents and the social, economic and educational costs of a continuation in current conditions looks high.
- ⚠ Support systems for working parents have been impacted and for some are completely eroded. Suddenly thrust into the role of a home schoolteacher, many parents are feeling ill-equipped and inept, the exact opposite of mastery and expertise that comprises feeling in flow.



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- ⚠ Initiatives deemed 'discretionary' are under increasing scrutiny, with many leadership development and executive coaching programs being cancelled, postponed or diluted, taking away much of the new sources of intellectual stimulation and vehicles for professional development and growth.
- ⚠ Even before COVID-19, Thrive Advisory's [Leadership Insights Series](#) research indicated that most senior leaders were critically concerned with the pace of change and external uncertainty and most felt their organisations were not equipped to respond to the leadership, talent and cultural implications of our VUCA world. COVID-19 has increased the risk and challenges exponentially while also stripping away many of the financial and organisational vehicles to respond to the challenges.
- ⚠ With so many urgent organisational requirements to attend to, many typical talent processes are being affected:
  - Typical performance management and employee feedback processes such as 360 processes and employee engagement surveys have been impacted, leaving some without clear guidance on their performance, impact and necessary adjustments.
  - An ad hoc approach is being taken to expectation management and impact on KPIs, resulting in a lack of clarity for employees about what is required of them amidst COVID-19 pressures and work from home parameters.
- ⚠ As organisations respond to COVID-19 and project its short and long-term financial impact, many are restructuring and downsizing their employee base with wide-spanning implications:
  - Those who remain may be required to take on additional roles/responsibilities outside of their areas of expertise requiring an extension and potential overstretch beyond their SME comfort zone.



## LivingWell

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- ⚠ The explosion in use of video-conferencing platforms in response to the pandemic has triggered an unofficial mass social experiment, showing at scale what's always been true: virtual interactions come with high taxes on the brain: 'zoom fatigue', 'zoom gloom' and being 'zoomed out' may be our newest mental health burdens.
- ⚠ [Video calls require more focus than face-to-face meetings](#) as we have to work harder to process non-verbal cues including body language, facial expression and the tone and pitch of voice, all of which consumes significant energy. Bringing our minds together when our bodies remain apart may be creating dissonance, conflicting feelings and exhaustion.
- ⚠ [Silence on video calls and the concern about talking over others leaves people anxious and uncomfortable about the technology.](#) One study found VC delays negatively impact our views of others with delays of 1.2 seconds in perceptions of the other party being less focused or friendly.
- ⚠ The aspects of our lives that used to be separate – work, family and friends – are happening in the same physical space through a screen, impacting our sense of normalcy and boundaries.
- ⚠ Physical space limitations and technology is making it more challenging to disconnect from work demands and signal the end of the workday. The lack of a physical 3rd space to decompress and transition from work equally continues to take a toll on those working from home.
- ⚠ Typical spaces, routines and outlets for many non-work-related intellectual engagement and flow, such as hobbies, creative outlets and exercise have been disrupted.



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- Those who remain may also be grappling with survivor guilt and concern for colleagues affected, unsure of how to be supportive.
  - Those who no longer have roles, may experience psychological and identity loss, in addition to the more obvious financial loss.
- ⚠️ A lack of understanding or thorough discussions of the disparate experiences of the *Change Curve* and its impact on intellectual engagement and flow is resulting in misalignment and misunderstanding of people's needs. Coupled with the aforementioned risks, current organisational conditions are sub-optimal for creating a sense of focus, flow and mastery, all impacting leaders uniquely:
- Some leaders are feeling overly challenged as a result of the complexity, ambiguity and pace of change experienced in such a short amount of time.
  - Others may feel stagnant and bored due to the social distancing restrictions, the need to work from home and shifts in their role and requirements.
  - Others still report they are currently feeling overwhelmed and stretched for time and physical energy because of additional task-related requirements but simultaneously feel mentally under-stimulated because their current work is not intellectually engaging or challenging.
  - Many are coping with the immediate pressures of being stood down or having their hours reduced, including financial impacts and psychological identity impacts.



## LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

- ⚠️ As noted in our Balance and Boundaries section, living situations may not be set up in a way that is conducive to all people living, working and studying simultaneously under one roof, wreaking havoc on concentration and ability to find a sense of flow.
- ⚠️ As individuals continue to navigate the *COVID-19 Change Curve* they are experiencing varying levels of energy and motivation to engage in activities that would result in feelings of flow and mastery, but equally report pressure to be using the time to be more effective and productive, fuelled by social media.
- ⚠️ Those whose intellectual engagement and flow feels interrupted report feeling a sense of guilt for having those needs at a time when partners, family and friends are losing their jobs and grappling with more immediate safety and security needs. A sense of social survivor guilt can add a layer of complexity about what we **ought** not to be feeling, pressuring some to push their needs aside or underground, with the risk of resulting in mental health concerns.



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### Practical actions to take

- ▶ Regardless of whether feeling underwhelmed or overwhelmed, seek to hold two truths in mind about the future of work:
  - Jeff Immelt, the former General Electric CEO, who led GE through 3 black swan events including the GFC, advises leaders to manage the polarities of needing to deal with the absolute worst-case scenario related to COVID-19, while also being hopeful and optimistic about the opportunities and optionality it can present.
  - While allowing space to mourn what you and colleagues have “lost” amidst COVID-19, seek to balance this with what might be optimistically realistic in the new world. Identify the opportunities amidst the crisis and organisational shifts by asking “What are the things we could not do before but that we can do now?”
- ▶ Explore ways to address any imbalances:
  - Identify elements of your role that you can control and what you might shift to increase your sense of focus and flow.
  - Seek ways, even small ones, to re-balance what will give you energy and play to your strengths daily or weekly.
  - Consider ways you could provide opportunities to others, as elements that might be draining you intellectually might present a learning opportunity for a colleague or team member.
  - If “offloading” role elements is not feasible, consider how you can experiment with your schedule daily and weekly to allow time for deep thinking or creative work and ensure you have “spark joy” moments each day.



## LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

### Practical actions to take

- ▶ Reflect honestly on whether intellectual engagement and flow outside of work is a priority right now and how much energy you have available to expend addressing any imbalances – are you in ‘survive’ or ‘seek to thrive’ mode? If the former, perhaps pick this article up again when you feel it is more relevant and focus on your current priority needs, which may be more about vitality and energy or resilience-building or simply about coping.
- ▶ Reflect on the current levels of expectations you are holding, self and other-imposed (perfectionists and pleasers take note!) and sense-check their feasibility. Is it a conversation with yourself about dialling down your own expectations or do you need to have candid conversations with family, friends or colleagues about their expectations and your need to re-balance self-care and other-care?
- ▶ Consider whether you need to do more or do less to feel more in flow – are you overwhelmed, under-utilised or bored?
- ▶ Identify what remedy resonates most with you – finding more time for yourself, fewer tasks for others or engaging in a completely new non-work intellectual endeavour?
- ▶ Write your “ought to list” noting any pressures regarding what you think you ought to be doing (or not doing), and what you ought to be thinking/feeling (or not thinking/feeling). Note how these “oughts” make you feel and their effects on your body or energy.
- ▶ Seek to decipher whether current low levels of flow and focus are related to the nature of your task/responsibilities or to how you are thinking and feeling about them. How can you alter your mindset?
- ▶ Consider the elements of your reflection lists that are most within your control to shift from a physical or mindset perspective at this time. It is not the amount or type of stress that determines its impact, but rather our mindset regarding stress that matters most. 3 steps to switch your stress mindset are:





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- ▶ Consider ways to combine team meetings or individual catchups with cognitive capacity stretch or learning. With the risk of people feeling “zoomed out” rising and a need to be more selective about which meetings should be video meetings, seek to retain the connection of virtual hangouts with a change of content that allows opportunity to learn, grow and stretch thinking.
- Turn some virtual coffee or happy hour catch-ups into a virtual “lunch and learn” session with your colleagues.
- Switch it up! One session could be a virtual book club where you all read the same article or listen to the same podcast or TED talk and discussing or take turns “teaching” each other about a new piece of research or an emerging trend.
- Consider making these kinds of sessions optional so that those who need intellectual stimulation have a forum to do so while those feeling over-whelmed find time and space to rebalance their needs and energy.
- ▶ If you are feeling under-utilised and have more to offer, write a list of your strengths which you feel are not being fully used and how they can assist the team and organisation in the current COVID-19 climate. Reflect on skills and experiences you cultivated earlier in your career that your current colleagues might not be aware of, highlighting the kind of *leadership that is needed now*.
- ▶ If you find that you are lacking the freedom to be creative or innovative at work, consider micro wins throughout the week where you can take some creative latitude with your work tasks.
- ▶ If your work projects have been stalled or cancelled, consider ways in which your hard work could be repurposed or reframed.
- ▶ If you have scope and capacity and a desire to do some kind of executive development or upskilling, compile a wish-list of compelling topics and make a plan to spend 1-2 hours a week leveraging the plethora of online platforms that are available free or low cost.



## LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

- **Step 1: Acknowledge Your Stress** - See, label and acknowledge your stress to deliberately and consciously move neural activity from the amygdala (brain’s centre of emotion and fear) to the prefrontal cortex (responsible for executive control and planning).
- **Step 2: Own Your Stress** - By owning and even welcoming stress, we can connect to the positive motivation or personal value behind our stress. Try completing this sentence about what you identify in Step 1: “I’m stressed about [Step 1 stressor] because I deeply care about ...”
- **Step 3: Use Your Stress** - Connecting to the core (positive) values behind stress sets us up for the critical step of leveraging stress to achieve your goals and connect more deeply with the things that matter most to you. Considering how you might change your response to this stress to better facilitate your goals and your purpose. Ask yourself if your typical responses are in alignment with the values behind your stress or not and how you might change your response to this stress to better facilitate your goals and your purpose.
- ▶ Pin-point when and where you feel in and out of flow and experiment with physical space and your schedule within the bounds of what is feasible, noting what makes a positive difference to feelings of focus, flow, creativity and mastery.
- ▶ Take time to consider how your physical energy levels may be impacting your state of mental focus and flow, pinpointing a few practical actions from the Vitality & Energy section, seeking to ensure you are getting enough fresh air, exercise and the right nutrition to support your physical and mental energy.
- ▶ Consider what 3rd space is feasible for you – even if it is stepping outside your door for 5 minutes to signal the end of your workday, where possible.
- ▶ Punctuate your day with short and sharp breaks to facilitate focus and flow.



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- ▶ If you have lost sponsorship or funding for your executive development program or external executive coaching, consider ways you can seek similar support:
  - Seek out a peer coach or buddy.
  - Reach out to former managers and colleagues to seek and/or offer support.
  - Offer mentorship to others – offer to coach or mentor a direct report of one of your peers and seek the same for one of your team members.
  - Find a reverse mentor, someone much more junior than you in your organisation who will be a truth teller, invite them to challenge, confront and test the [dominant logic](#) coming from the top.
- ▶ Check in with yourself:
  - Reflect on where you feel you sit on the [COVID-19 Change Curve](#) and what has shifted in your thoughts and emotions related to work over the last few weeks.
  - Considering the potential risks above, reflect on your own needs and where intellectual engagement and flow falls on your list of priorities. Do you feel you are missing being in the flow or are you overwhelmed?
  - Take a [Marie Kondo](#) lens to your work and how you feel in your current role – what is sparking joy and what is draining you of energy?
- ▶ Check in with others:
  - Check in with your team members – how are your direct reports feeling and how may their needs intersect with yours?
  - Check in with your peers – how are they feeling and how may their needs intersect with yours?
  - Seek to have regular conversations with your people leader to discuss your current workload level and level of flow – whether you are feeling overwhelmed or under-utilised and some realistic strategies to address any challenges.



## LivingWell

Aspects of Wellbeing affected by our home, social and personal lives

- ▶ If you are feeling under-utilised or bored outside of work, consider:
  - Reflecting on any “bucket list” items relating to personal learning, growth or creativity that you have been procrastinating on starting.
  - Selecting one new goal, creative outlet or hobby to give you a creative outlet and encourage intellectual stimulation, creativity or flow.
  - Browsing online for compelling books, articles or podcasts – choose something that appeals to you and will stretch your thinking or teach you something new.
  - Researching organisations that align with your values or topics you are passionate about and seek out ways to volunteer your time and skills, ideally in ways that play to your natural strengths.
- ▶ Across work and life settings, reflect on the number and type of VCs/Zoom calls you are participating in each day and week and whether you are gaining or losing energy and flow as a result of your current mix.
- ▶ If you're feeling overstimulated or exhausted, turn your camera off and conserve this mental energy for important video calls with people you don't know very well, or for when you want the warm fuzzies you get from seeing someone you love. For work meetings that can be done by phone, try walking at the same time – even indoors if that's all that's possible.
- ▶ If experiencing guilt or other negative emotions about having needs in reference to those who are worse off than you are, seek to hold two truths in your mind to balance your empathy for others and their situation and needs with your own needs as they evolve. While considering how you are faring better than others can aid with gratitude, resilience and positive emotional outcomes, the potential downside can be a negating of your own emotions. Aim to internalise that both can co-exist and both of them can be met.



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- ▶ To quote Professor Adam Grant, we can't always control the waves of emotion that crash into us, but we can learn to ride them more gracefully. By noticing what causes them, we find clues on how to change them – or at least manage them.



## LivingWell

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- ▶ Having reflected on the points above, create a realistic and attainable set of concrete and pragmatic goals and actions that will allow you to assert control and provide a sense of movement in the right direction. Be careful not to set yourself up for feelings of failing or being inept by over-committing.
- ▶ Consider ways to turn your goals into daily, weekly or monthly habits to increase the likelihood of successfully completing them.
- ▶ Craft an "I will" list of things that could increase your flow, creativity and mastery in the longer-term, as the planning and anticipation of future experiences can be even more enjoyable than the experiences themselves.
- ▶ Wherever you are on the change curve and whether you are currently under or over stimulated, consider tennis pro Arthur Ashe's advice to "*Start where you are, use what you have and do what you can*", recognising that an imperfect step forward is better than a perfect step never taken.