



# Corporate Mental Health Alliance AUSTRALIA — MARCH 2024

**Measuring and improving leaders' wellbeing** — why and how?

**Workshop Insights** — from Audrey McGibbon.



Welcome to this special edition of the GLWS Wellbeing Insights series — written specifically for Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA) after the annual members' gathering on 6 March 2024 to capture key insights and reflections from two workshops focused on leaders' wellbeing. Specifically, the workshops aimed to explore —

- WHY leaders' wellbeing is a priority for the corporate mental health agenda.
- HOW employers can assess and develop their leaders' wellbeing — sensitively, accurately and efficiently for positive change, individually and collectively.

*I want to say a huge thank you to CMHAA for providing this opportunity and to everyone who participated in the workshops — I found the experience immensely energising. Discussions in both workshops quickly highlighted the existence of several psychological and organisational complexities that mean summarising has been an ambitious task!*

*Here's my best shot at our top 5 headlines from the workshops —*

- 1. Leading effectively in a VUCA world is a big ask of organisational leaders. More so than ever, they are being expected to achieve multiple frequently competing outcomes — over and over and over.*
- 2. A growing requirement of all people leaders in Australia is to improve employee mental health, wellbeing and psychosocial health (PSH) outcomes.*
- 3. Against a backdrop of expectations that are reaching intolerable levels for many, leaders' wellbeing is deteriorating — and contemporary leadership is the chief culprit.*
- 4. Without healthy, high-functioning leaders, the broader improvements to mental health, wellbeing and employee psychosocial health outcomes that are frantically being sought by organisations become harder to achieve — I'd say even impossible.*
- 5. Leaders who a) are helped to precisely identify the root causes of their hindrance demands and stressors across all aspects of their work and personal life and b) who experience individually and collectively legitimised ways to mitigate, protect, conserve and renew their wellbeing — fare better on almost every personal and organisational health and performance metric.*

*If the headlines aren't enough, please dive into and enjoy the rest of this paper — if you have any questions, suggestions or specific needs you would like some help with, I'd be pleased to hear from you.*

**Audrey McGibbon**



# The VUCA world makes leadership harder...and more important.

Leading in a VUCA world requires developing VUCA leadership capacities.

## From new leadership challenges...

## ... to critical leadership capacities.

Leaders' work and personal environments are constantly changing. Their new norm is a state of semi-permanent hyper-alertness, constant disruption and need for adaptation, the root cause of which is a dynamic of continually emerging political, economic, societal, technological, legal, health and environmental shifts.



In volatile times, an organisation's roadmap is unreliable or uncharted. Leaders who can navigate unforeseen conditions using only a compass and their 'true north' are who inspire and keep their teams and businesses on track. Resolute values and clear alignment on priorities are the critical compass points they need to communicate and coordinate efforts.

In a world awash with infinite information, data and possibilities — real and fake, good and bad generative AI — both problem analysis and solving are fraught with risk. Cognitive overload from 24/7 'brain bombing' exacerbates fatigue, anxiety, insecurities, loss of confidence and uncritical or fatalistic acceptance.



Uncertainty in leaders is an attractive quality — if it conveys humility and open-mindedness. However, excessive uncertainty is paralysing and severely hinders progress for teams and organisations. Effective leaders marshal and apply a collective wisdom to uncertainty by facilitating shared insights and developing sense-making capacities across their business.

Today's interconnected, inclusive world demands rapid connection and collaboration with diverse stakeholders from almost every employee. Intricate relationship dynamics, diffused power structures, blurred roles and fuzzy boundaries create webs of interdependencies leaders must navigate.



Clarity is the antidote to complexity. Leaders whose messages are simple, concise and seek to align diverse perspectives facilitate a shared appreciation of different stakeholders' needs, expectations, responsibilities, outcomes and processes. This ensures a collective focus on the right priorities for optimal resource allocation, collaboration and fast execution.

Today's leaders and professionals live with more existential angst, impermanence and ambiguity than their predecessors. In almost every context — educational, business, environmental, career and personal — notions of predictability, certainty, control, steady state and BAU are becoming relics from last century ways of working and living.

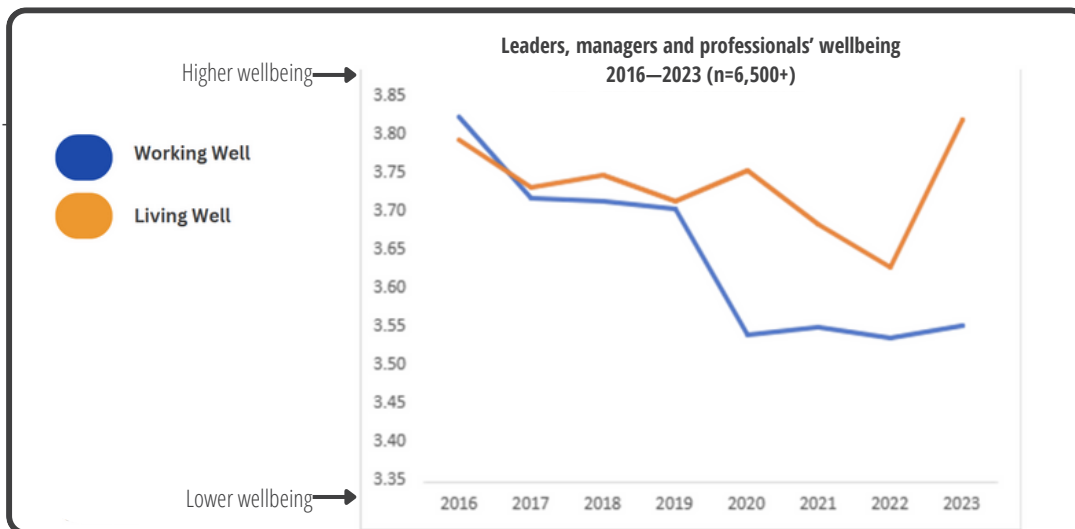


Leaders who develop greater philosophical, intellectual and psychological acceptance of their discomfort at not *knowing* — personally and in business — adapt more effectively to the VUCA world challenges that are inherently and infinitely ambiguous, constantly evolving, and/or defined by potentially unresolvable tensions with no known solutions.

## WHY — 10 reasons to prioritise leaders' mental health and wellbeing.

### 1. Leaders' work-related wellbeing is deteriorating.

GLWS data gathered on over 6,500+ mostly Australian and NZ leaders, managers and professionals since 2013 shows *leaders' work-related wellbeing has declined significantly* while outside of work it has remained steady; 1 in 4 leaders, managers and professionals report they are now mentally struggling at work and this number has increased by an average of 27% each year since 2020.



### 2. The root cause of leaders' poor wellbeing is their work.

While factors such as gender, age, seniority, income and carer status raise other considerations, *the overarching message is that contemporary work and organisational practices are harming leaders' mental health and wellbeing* more than at any other time since data has been collected.

**Recommended** — see insert on page 8 for more about leaders' changing challenges and requirements.

### 3. Leadership expectations are becoming intolerable.

Conventionally, people in leadership positions have been widely perceived as having better wellbeing than other segments of the workforce — primarily because their work has tended to be more interesting with greater opportunities for personal growth, mastery, agency, accountability, psychological safety, relational support, with better job security and rewards — i.e., factors known to protect and maximise positive mental wellbeing. However, for many senior executives, managers and professionals today, this is not their world. For them, if such halcyon days ever existed, they have become a rarity; replaced by exponentially more complex and unclear (even competing) expectations, diffused power structures, reduced authority, fuzzy decision-making mandates and diminished freedom to exercise independent judgement — while under greater scrutiny from more demanding stake freedom in the context of post-pandemic economic and societal values.



The upshot of serial cost-out initiatives over several years is often that —

- Leaders have fewer resources with which to buffer the increased pressure arising from role demands and stressors that are becoming intolerable.
- Practical, palatable or meaningful support is not available to people leaders and/or does not convincingly sanction the necessary reset or conservation of their energies, at the individual or organisational level.
- Fatigue and impending overwhelm are the new norm.

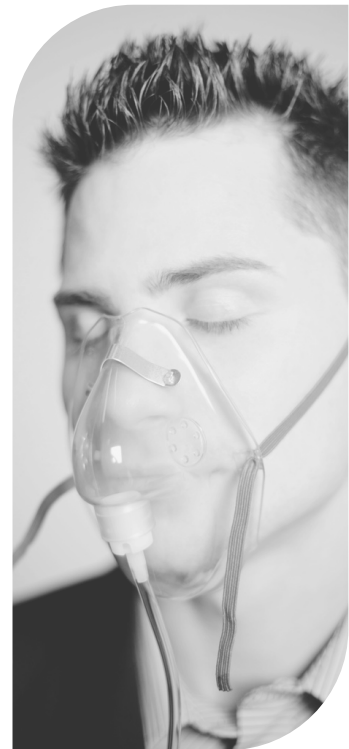
#### 4. For individuals on the brink — the costs are high.

Individual leaders with lower levels of work-related wellbeing are also at higher risk of experiencing other negative outcomes that profoundly impact them/families —

- Burnout, languishing, anxiety and dysregulated moods.
- Low self-esteem and elevated imposter syndrome.
- Reduced job-satisfaction, disrupted careers and failure to realise full potential.
- Involvement in ER complaints, litigation and performance-related processes.

#### 5. For employers — people leaders are vital to improving employee mental health outcomes.

- Showing humanity, compassion and sincere duty of care are strong motivations for employers to help individual leaders understand and improve how their wellbeing, satisfaction and performance are affected by personal and home life factors and work-related habits, dominant organisational and team practices, systemic processes and workplace cultures.
- Employers are also increasingly recognising people leaders as vital linchpins to driving improved mental/psychosocial health outcomes for all employees.
- By facilitating improvements to their leaders' wellbeing, employers fortify the entire organization.
- Investing in leaders' welfare isn't just compassionate; it's a strategic imperative to positive mental health at work becoming achievable for all employees.
- *The psychosocial health (PSH) and wellbeing of an organisation's leaders are crucial as they directly impact their ability to care for others. (Lanaj et al., 2022).*
- *A leader's psychological health affects employee health, wellbeing outcomes, managerial quality, organizational psychosocial safety climate, and helps prevent future health problems within organizations. (Parent-Lamarche & Biron 2022).*





## **6. Moving beyond awareness & destigmatisation needs leaders to relate and engage personally.**

Employers have achieved significant success raising awareness and de-stigmatising mental health issues in the workplace. However, as discussed in both the opening and closing addresses, the mental health solutions and outcomes needles are not moving in the right direction. The reasons are undoubtedly multi-factorial. However, the decline in leaders' own work-related mental health is a major barrier preventing meaningful improvement to broader employee mental health and PSH risk management metrics.

## **7. Leaders' own psychological health alters the quality of their leadership.**

Managerial quality is a known predictor of employee mental health and can neutralize psychosocial risks (Rugulies et al., 2018).

## **8. Healthy, high functioning leaders achieve better outcomes against most organisational metrics.**

Leaders are not only key drivers of employee mental health and PSH risk outcomes; they also play a key role in achieving other organisational outcomes. Leader wellbeing is a key predictor of—

- better employee attraction, retention and engagement of best talent
- better employee relations, fewer complaints, lower sickness costs, better return to work ratios
- higher growth, productivity and organisational efficiencies
- innovation speed of execution and success
- higher compliance, integrity, non-financial conduct metrics
- brand, reputation and even share price.

## **9. Advocacy and permission-giving are not enough — leaders also need to role-model healthy, safe work practices and convincing self-care.**

Despite feeling a lack of positive mental wellbeing themselves, most leaders will still want (and feel pressure) to advocate for their employees' wellbeing, but very few can role-model the behaviours required to protect or promote positive mental wellbeing – for either themselves or their employees.

The absence of role-modelling by leaders lowers psychological safety for employees considering accessing their employer's formal policies and resources, with commonly perceived risks posed to their careers, reputations, rewards or success. Lack of leader role-modelling can also increase team members' compulsion to please and serve where the manager is well-liked.

## 10. Leaders cast long wellbeing shadows — individually and collectively.

A leader's *wellbeing shadow* often comes with unintended consequences that can inhibit employee thriving and psychosocial health. What leaders say, do, measure and prioritise, personally and for their people, profoundly sets the tone for the practices and values others seek to uphold.

**Recommended** — review Kate Connor's notes from her CMHAA workshop on leadership systems — *Leaders cannot give what they do not have.*



“When organisations talk about needing to ‘develop wellbeing as a leadership capability’, ‘improve mental health leadership’, ‘ensure people leaders care for their teams’ and ‘manage their psychosocial health risk obligations’ ...they’re not plucking the requirements out of thin air —fostering improved employee wellbeing is quintessential to contemporary leadership —along with a multitude of other expectations.

*Over a decade ago, the Center for Leadership Development and Stanford University found that CEOs felt confronted by ever-growing stress, yet nearly two-thirds received no outside leadership advice or support, despite nearly all of them wanting it. Recent global events have magnified the demand. Prioritizing mental health and wellbeing for leaders is no longer only a matter of ethics or niceties — when ~70% of senior executives are considering quitting their organisation for a job less damaging to their wellbeing I’d say it’s a distinct strategic necessity.*

*I see a pressing need to consider all leadership expectations holistically as only one facet of the leadership coin — with leaders’ personal mental health, talents, motivations, needs and potential on the other.*

*Above all, I hope employers will soon come to value both sides of this leadership coin equally and appreciate them as mutually enhancing interdependent forces. Surely, it’s imperative this generation of ‘servant leaders’ can remain well, high-functioning and self-sustaining as they strive on everyone’s behalf in pursuit of ever increasing expectations? Prioritising effective solutions to the complexities of leader wellbeing can deliver a win-win for everyone.”*

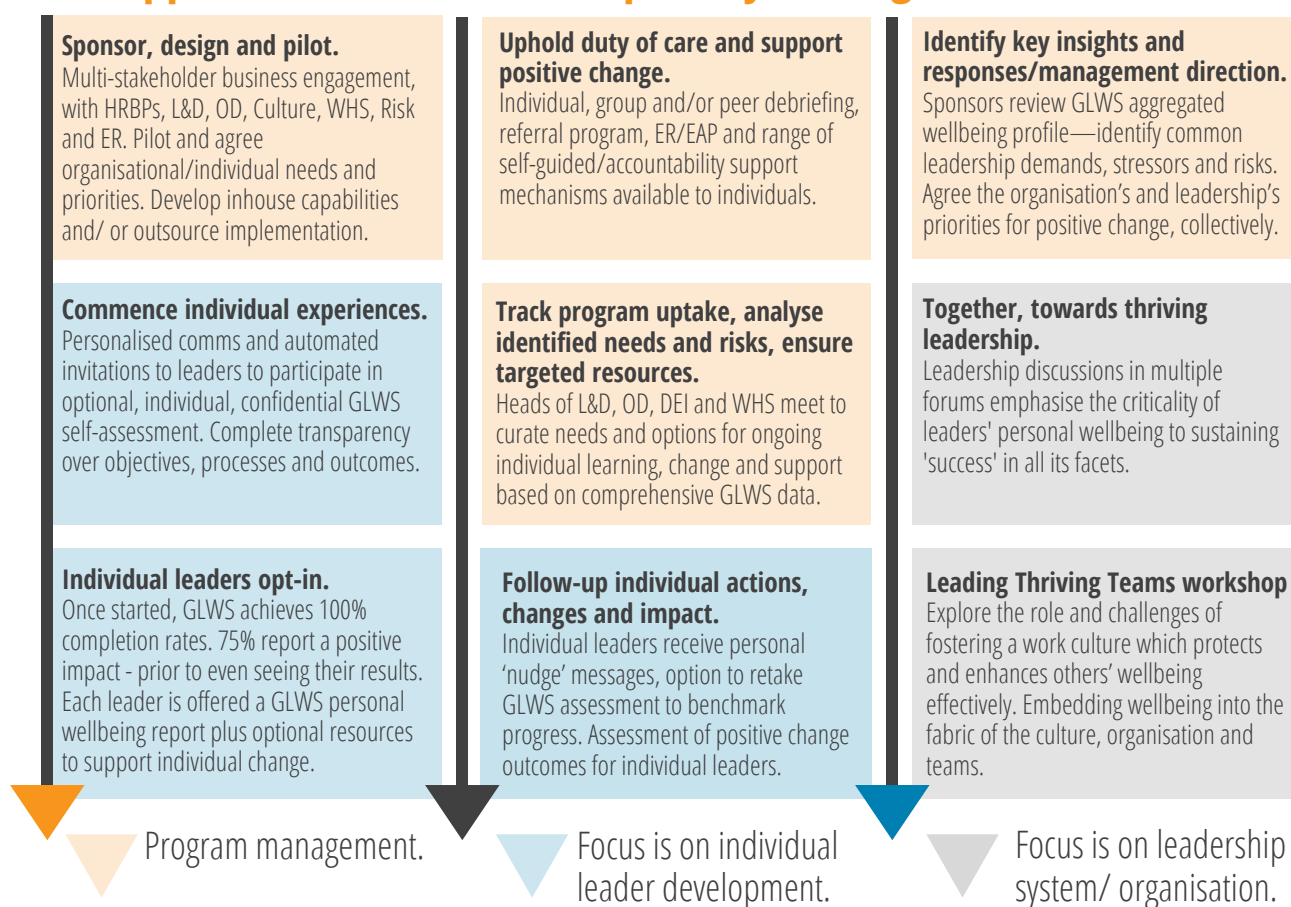
**Audrey McGibbon**  
March 2024

## HOW — Measuring and improving leader wellbeing effectively.

### Overview.

Using the real-life case study of a senior leader— under the alias of ‘*Ali Overitall*’— participants were invited to review and discuss Ali’s [GLWS Personal Wellbeing Report](#) showing Ali’s responses to 126 psychometrically validated wellbeing questions aligned to GLWS Framework (see page 9). In the plenary, we briefly also considered Ali’s results within the context of the [GLWS Leadership Team Report](#) showing a summary of the de-identified and aggregated wellbeing data for their peers across the business.

### The approach and solution adopted by the organisation.



### About the GLWS<sup>®</sup>

The GLWS is a reliable and valid psychometric measurement system that detects the symptoms, root-cause stressors and demands that negatively impact wellbeing and performance. It provides individuals with personalised and comprehensive data to identify exactly what needs to happen to neutralise their risks, and the steps they can take to protect and enhance their capacity to thrive—professionally and personally. As there’s a limit to how much control or change a single person can realise by themselves, the extra power that comes from the GLWS is in uncovering what needs to happen to fix the components of the work, team, organisational *collectively* to learn, live, lead and embed lasting positive change, leader by leader, team by team and across entire organisations.



## Unmasking the realities of leaders' wellbeing.

Attempting to measure leaders' wellbeing first requires a strong conceptual model and definition. At the workshops, we used the GLWS<sup>®</sup> Framework (see insert). It reflects the major demands and resources that leaders experience across multiple different dimensions of their wellbeing; and it represents a holistic view that extends beyond individual mental and physical health factors to include other personal considerations *and* recognise the relevance of distinguishing between professional, work and home-life situations.



The GLWS has been rigorously validated on a standardisation sample 6,500+ leaders, professionals and managers in work undertaken by the University of Melbourne, Centre for Wellbeing Science. It is this Framework and the 126 items that go with it that are the engine of the GLWS Personal, Team and Group Wellbeing system.


## Focus areas at CMHAA workshop.

Participants reviewed Ali's wellbeing profile by splitting into three groups each with a different focus area (linked to the Centre for Transformative Work Design (CTWD) Thrive Framework's pillars)—

**1. Mitigating Illness**— reviewed Ali's GLWS Personal Report to identify and detect signs indicative of Ali experiencing (or at risk of developing) symptoms of ill-health. *(Note: the GLWS was not developed for use as a clinical or diagnostic measure of mental health. However, validation studies using clinical tools have established it is a psychometrically reliable and valid predictor of burnout and positive mental wellbeing.)*

**2. Preventing Harm**— reviewed Ali's results to determine how Ali's job may be harming or protecting their wellbeing. Participants familiar with the CTWD SMART work design dimensions considered Ali's experience in the context of work demands and resources—the **Stimulating**, **Mastery**, **Agency**, and **Relational** components of Ali's work experienced as protective or harmful; and what resources, support or changes would make their work-related experiences more **Tolerable**.

**3. Promoting Thriving**— reviewed Ali's results to identify what (if any) work-related factors and experiences are positively supporting them currently and to identify ways Ali and/or the organisation may be able to craft or promote a stronger sense of purpose, meaning, learning, self-confidence, lifelong development, stronger connections to self and others.



**Until your leaders have infinite energy,  
time, pairs of hands, patience, skills to  
walk on water and can perform endless  
magic without interference from pesky  
needs or feelings of their own—**

— we'll help you deploy a preventative mental health and wellbeing strategy to sustain optimal leadership, provide powerfully accurate individual and business insights for change and deliver measurable improvement across all the key pain points of concern to your leaders and the business.

If you would like to learn more about the unique GLWS system, please contact us to discuss your needs and objectives and how we can help.

[support@glwswellbeing.com](mailto:support@glwswellbeing.com)

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