

# How “Carewashing” Alienates Employees

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June 10, 2024



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**Summary.** Too many organizations with unsustainable “work hard, play hard” cultures believe that checking the well-being box by offering mindfulness training or yoga classes qualifies them as having a positive and safe culture when, in fact, they’re merely “carewashing.” Like... [more](#)

Post-pandemic, employees have experienced record-high stress and burnout and are increasingly attracted to organizations with cultures that support well-being at work. A 2024 Gallup survey indicates that the percentage of employees who strongly agree that their organization cares about their overall well-being has plunged from 49% in 2020 to 21% in 2024, while a previous survey

found that improving well-being and culture rated much higher than increasing compensation among the things “quiet quitters” would like to change about their work.

Too many organizations with unsustainable “work hard, play hard” cultures believe that checking the well-being box by offering mindfulness training or yoga classes qualifies them as having a positive and safe culture when, in fact, they’re merely “carewashing.” Like the more familiar term greenwashing, carewashing is derived from whitewashing: covering up or putting a misleading spin on a failure to meet some commitment, stated claim, or standard.

At a time when employee well-being has been unequivocally tied to organizational performance and yet workers are historically unhappy, particularly in the wake of the shared trauma of a pandemic, leaders should do everything in their power to provide healthy, motivating workplaces.

Further, organizations that claim to have a caring culture must align rhetoric with reality to avoid both external reputational risk and internal operational hurdles, from innovation stagnation and compromised psychological safety to a negative emotional climate rife with cynicism. If unchecked, this can lead to an environment where those who can leave, leave — and those who remain are disengaged and unmotivated, giving rise to both absenteeism and presenteeism rather than real engagement.

### **Carewashing as Cultural Misalignment**

In this article, our focus is on carewashing as a misalignment between what leaders portray as cultures of care (often referencing the organization’s stated values) and employees’ actual daily experiences at work.

Emotions are the invisible drivers of workplace culture — i.e., workplace attitudes, behaviors, norms, and practices. One of the most powerful drivers of motivation is the feeling of relatedness,

which exerts a compelling influence on both cognitive patterns and emotional processes. Relatedness involves care for each other's well-being and gives rise to belonging.

A genuine culture of care is a powerful magnet for top talent, particularly for younger generations. But carewashing, whether it's used to create a falsely positive brand for the employer or is simply the result of tone-deaf leaders, inevitably leads to erosion of trust in leadership as well as a reduction in employee engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being — and eventually, to employee turnover.

### **How Carewashing Happens**

Here are a few reasons for the disconnect between what an organization says it will do and what it actually does regarding workplace culture:

#### **Ill-equipped leaders**

Inadvertent or even unwitting carewashing occurs when leaders lack the will, skills, or insight to deal with existing organizational culture problems. Some leaders overvalue the optics of harmony in the workplace and may lack self-awareness, underestimating the potentially devastating impact their lack of attention to thorny culture issues can have on their direct reports.

For example, consider a leader who hires a consultant to offer a well-being workshop for their team. The consultant's mental health recommendations include setting appropriate boundaries between working hours and personal time. During the afternoon workshop, the leader sends out emails with tasks that employees are expected to complete for the next morning. The leader knows they'll have to do these tasks in the evening, after the workshop, to get them done on time. These requests — again, sent *during* the workshop — directly violate the consultant's well-being recommendations, and the mixed messages create stress for the team.

## **Lack of follow-through**

Carewashing also happens when leaders, in order to meet immediate hiring and retention challenges, claim to prioritize employee well-being but fail to follow through to ensure that their employees have the skills and resources to bring those commitments to life.

For example, consider a CEO who, as part of their efforts to improve their organization's hiring profile, insists that HR leaders include language in job descriptions that references a caring, safe, and inclusive culture and touts the organization's commitment to flexibility. The idea is to attract women candidates, who are more likely to have caregiver roles that limit their ability to spend eight to 10 consecutive hours in the office, five days a week. Unpaid caregiving hours almost tripled between 2020 and 2023, and millennials have now become the largest cohort of caregivers who also work full time — enlarging the pool of candidates who may seek out organizations with flexible policies.

However, while this tactic may improve diversity and hiring metrics in the short term, the new hires may quickly leave if nothing is changed within the organization to ensure managers know how to create psychologically safe environments where team members can ask for support and flexibility when needed.

## **Self-interest**

Carewashing can also include ethical fading and motivated blindness, when self-interest leads to minimizing or overlooking unethical conduct. Organizations and their leaders are sometimes faced with the dilemma of either addressing problem behaviors and risking reputational damage, or shielding their reputation by ignoring or hiding the problem.

Another (and one of the most egregious) forms of carewashing occurs when leaders who pretend to care about employee well-being and safety brush off workplace harassment disclosures and trivialize the harm done. Consider a senior officer who has been publicly celebrated for “making the organization a more caring

place.” They seem to care, but when an employee discloses harassment, they use trite phrases like “your well-being is our priority” and offer psychological support “if you need it,” all without explicitly acknowledging any wrongdoing. Even worse is if that feigned concern morphs into intimidation and veiled threats like “we wouldn’t want this to affect your chances of getting promoted.”

Finally, some people seek leadership positions specifically to gain control and power. These individuals often present dark personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) and are skilled at crafting a polished image that they adapt to fit their environment. These toxic individuals can use carewashing as a manipulative impression-management tactic to rise to the top of organizations. They might say all the right things, but their actions will not align with their words, as they only “know the words but not the music” of empathy and emotional intelligence.

### **How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Carewashing**

Rather than enabling, tolerating, rewarding, and modeling toxic behaviors that contribute to carewashing, leaders must bravely address the emotional culture, even when it’s messy. Committing to culture work as more than a box-checking exercise requires humility, self-awareness, authenticity, and integrity at all levels of interaction.

To safeguard against carewashing, organizations must foster a resilient culture grounded in trust, empathy, psychological safety, and integrity. To that end, we have four recommendations:

#### **Be who you say you are**

Ensure alignment between commitments and capabilities. Select a limited number of care-related commitments you know you can live up to in a specified time frame, and make sure the implementation lives up to the messaging. Be transparent in your care efforts and acknowledge where they fall short.

## **Ask and be prepared to really listen**

Learn about the power and payoff of fostering a climate of emotional agency within your team and the wider organization. Conduct regular organization-wide assessments that get to the root of the desired culture of caring. Assessments should preserve employee anonymity and use scientifically validated measures to ensure the results are accurate, reliable, credible, and ethical.

Many types of culture assessments are available. Those that get to the heart of how people feel at (and about) work, such as the Emergy Emotional Climate Audit, produce meaningful results that enable organizations to proactively co-create healthy and safe cultures, supporting employee well-being.

Recognize that you may receive news that is hard to hear. As such, it may be necessary to work with senior leaders and HR to safeguard the integrity of assessment results. We've seen cases where results were altered because "management needs this to look good," breeding cynicism from employees who didn't see their responses or concerns reflected. Commit to sharing your journey of continuous improvement with stakeholders, and involve employees in the process of co-creating a culture of care.

## **Align leadership criteria with organizational values**

Organizations that are singularly focused on short-term profits may base their leader selection on competencies such as charisma, extraversion, ability to influence others, goal orientation, ability to make difficult decisions, and high risk tolerance, ignoring positive interpersonal skills. The problem with this profile is that it can correspond to dark personalities.

To create a safe and healthy workplace, organizations should screen for people-based values and competencies (empathy, listening skills, openness to others, caring) and ethical behavior in hiring and promoting; evaluate performance based on criteria that go beyond superficial, short-term results; and implement (in action, not only words) policies and procedures that recognize and address red flags in leader behaviors.

## **Be self-aware**

Senior leaders who want to avoid carewashing need the wisdom and humility to admit they don't have all the answers, be willing to be vulnerable, and display curiosity and a learner mindset. Not acknowledging the impact of the emotional culture on employee productivity is a central feature of carewashing.

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In a true culture of care, leaders create a well-tuned sense of trust that allows employees to share their struggles, needs, and aspirations in a safe environment. Using unsubstantiated claims of employee well-being as a marketing tool is a quick fix that will have profoundly negative long-term consequences. But mustering the courage to address emotional culture as a shared team reality, where caring is a fact rather than fiction, will help leaders sustainably orchestrate organizations that attract, motivate, and retain the best talent.

**Maren Gube** is an international speaker whose scientific research on creativity and award-winning insights into why women leave STEM fields have made her a dedicated advocate for workplace cultures that invite all team members to belong, learn, and innovate. She is coauthor of the Harvard Business Review articles "4 Ways to Spark Creativity When You're Feeling Stressed" and "Resilient Organizations Make Psychological Safety a Strategic Priority." As the executive director of Resiliti, Maren is committed to cultivating organizational resilience and emotionally healthy workplaces, combining evidence-based insights with actionable strategies. You can read more about her [here](#).

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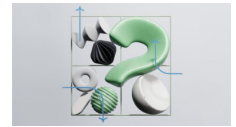
Québec in Trois-Rivières (Canada). She studies and has published research on psychopathy and other dark personalities in the workplace; leadership; toxic workplace culture; and employee well-being. She consults with organizations and teaches on corporate psychopathy, employee selection, mental health in the workplace, organizational fraud, leadership, and work culture. She has been invited to speak for organizations such as the Conference Board of Canada, the Canadian federal government, the Retail Council of Canada, and Facebook. She is the author of the book *Dark Personalities in the Workplace*, and she regularly posts on LinkedIn, where she has received mentions: Top Community Voice on Leadership, Team Management, and Recruitment.

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