



From trade-off to transformation: The Working Well Framework for sustained performance

Most organizations have accepted a false trade-off: that high performance requires sacrificing well-being, and that protecting well-being means accepting lower output.

They've responded by building better recovery systems — expanded leave, mental health benefits, flexibility, coaching access.

These investments aren't failures. But they're adaptations to a flawed assumption rather than a challenge to it.

Performance and well-being are not competing outcomes. The trade-off isn't natural. It's constructed, and it's being reinforced every day through the policies and norms of how your organization works.

When that trade-off is baked into how work operates, no amount of well-being programming will resolve it. You're helping people recover from the conditions without changing the conditions themselves.

This piece is a written compendium to the session "From trade-off to transformation: Rethinking performance and well-being" presented at BetterUp Uplift 2026 by Kate Zipay, PhD, Research Professor and Associate Director of Research and Impact at the Center for Working Well at Purdue University; and Allie Gabriel, PhD, Organizational Psychologist and Director at the Center for Working Well at Purdue University.

What the research shows

The short term trap	Who it hits hardest	The attunement advantage
<p>On days when employees work longer hours, same-day performance often does improve. Coworkers rate them as more effective. More gets done. That's exactly why overwork gets reinforced — the system rewards it in the moment.</p> <p>But those same longer days reliably reduce sleep. And when people sleep less, they start the next day with fewer psychological resources, especially resilience: the capacity to stay focused and adapt when things get hard. Next-day performance suffers. Not dramatically. Not always visibly. But enough to matter, especially when the pattern repeats.</p> <p>(Ten Brummelhuis, Calderwood, Rosen, & Gabriel, Journal of Organizational Behavior, 2025)</p>	<p>These effects are strongest among professionals and high performers: people whose work depends on focus, persistence, and self-regulation. The people your organization can least afford to lose to burnout are the ones most vulnerable to this cycle.</p>	<p>Emerging research from Zipay and Gabriel points to a consistent pattern: people who approach work intentionally — accurately reading their internal cues and the external demands around them, rather than reacting automatically to pressure — show meaningfully stronger outcomes across every dimension that matters.</p> <p>Compared to those operating on autopilot, people with higher attunement show:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Stronger confidence in their work + Greater mental focus + Greater curiosity and learning orientation + More initiative and proactivity + Better job performance + Markedly lower burnout <p>Sustainable performance is built by noticing and adjusting how you work, then creating the conditions that make that possible across your organization.</p>

The Working Well Framework: Attune. Discern. Sustain.

The Working Well framework, developed by Zipay & Gabriel, treats energy as a strategic input, and gives leaders a practical way to build performance that compounds over time rather than depletes it.

Attune	Discern	Sustain
<p>Notice what the work is actually asking of you — not what feels loud or politically visible. Attunement means pausing long enough to evaluate what truly needs to get done, what resources you actually have, and where you'll be sharpest. The discipline is assembling the week intentionally rather than absorbing it reactively.</p>	<p>Separate signal from noise. Discernment is the judgment to stop before you overwork: to delegate instead of absorb, defer instead of escalate. It asks: does this actually require my intensity right now, and am I the right person to carry it?</p>	<p>The ongoing practice of recalibration. You won't get this perfectly right. You will overcommit, and you will override signals. Sustain means noticing that and adjusting. The goal is stopping the swing between overdrive and recovery, and building performance that holds over time.</p>
<p>i WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE</p>	<p>i WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE</p>	<p>i WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE</p>
<p>Before a heavy week, identifying which conversations require strategic clarity, which require emotional steadiness, and which can move forward without you.</p>	<p>When an issue surfaces late Thursday, pausing before escalating to ask: does this need resolution tonight? What would actually happen if this moved to Monday?</p>	<p>A deliberate pause before the week begins — 10 minutes to assess capacity and commitments, and actively redistribute, reschedule, renegotiate, or remove work before the week locks in.</p>

The CHRO's lens: You shape the signals

Individual attunement matters.
<p>But as an HR leader, you do something more consequential: you influence the norms, signals, and expectations that either support or undermine this capacity across your entire organization.</p> <p>The trade-off isn't maintained by bad intentions. It's maintained by structural cues that rarely get named:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Goals that expand without others being removed + Responsiveness outside hours that quietly becomes a badge of commitment + Urgency language that treats everything as equally critical + Celebration of endurance rather than judgment + Recovery systems that manage the impact of work without questioning its design <p>The more consequential question is what signals your organization is actually sending — and whether those signals are building the workforce you're trying to build.</p>

Part one: Personal reflection

Where are you running on autopilot? The prompts below are designed to spark awareness — not to evaluate or score. As you read, simply notice what feels familiar. The goal is to surface patterns you may not have consciously chosen.

On attention and responsiveness	On capacity and commitment	On the signals you send	Reflection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Do you check messages before deciding what matters most today? <hr/> + Do you respond to what arrives rather than working from your own priorities? <hr/> + Have you treated responsiveness itself as productivity? <hr/> + Have you stayed available during time you intended to protect? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Do you say yes before fully assessing your capacity? <hr/> + Do you absorb work instead of delegating when you're already stretched? <hr/> + Have you stayed late rather than initiating a conversation about scope? <hr/> + Do you feel guilty when you're not visibly busy? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Do you send messages outside working hours without considering what it communicates? <hr/> + Do you celebrate pushing through more than making thoughtful tradeoffs? <hr/> + Do you use urgency language without defining what "urgent" actually means? <hr/> + Do you equate constant availability with commitment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + What patterns stand out? <hr/> + Where might you be operating automatically rather than intentionally? <hr/> + What would it look like to recalibrate — not by caring less, but by working more deliberately?

Part two: Organizational signal assessment

<p>01</p> <p>How we talk about urgency</p>	<p>Everything is urgent, all the time; the word has lost meaning</p>	<p>Urgency is defined, communicated with context, and revisited when conditions change</p>	<p>←.....→</p>
<p>02</p> <p>What we celebrate</p>	<p>We celebrate endurance, availability, and output volume</p>	<p>We actively celebrate people who make smart calls about where to invest effort</p>	<p>←.....→</p>
<p>03</p> <p>How goals expand</p>	<p>Goals expand regularly without others being removed</p>	<p>Goal-setting includes deliberate removal; we protect capacity as a resource</p>	<p>←.....→</p>
<p>04</p> <p>How leadership models availability</p>	<p>Senior leaders signal that availability at all hours is the standard</p>	<p>Leadership actively and visibly models deliberate work patterns</p>	<p>←.....→</p>
<p>05</p> <p>How we treat recovery</p>	<p>Recovery happens outside of work: PTO, benefits, wellness programs</p>	<p>Recovery is embedded in how work is designed, not treated as separate from it</p>	<p>←.....→</p>

Reflection prompts for leadership teams:

- + Where is the gap largest between what you intend to signal and what you're actually communicating?

- + Which of these would have the highest impact if you shifted it in the next 90 days?

- + What is the next visible move — not the five-year strategy, but what changes Monday?

Three places to start

Based on what leaders most commonly identify in this reflection exercise, here are three high-leverage starting points.

01

Reclaim the word "urgent."

Establish a shared definition. When something is urgent, say why, by when, and what it displaces. Without that context, people treat everything as equally critical, which means nothing gets the focus it deserves.

02

Make goal removal as visible as goal addition.

Every time scope expands, ask: what comes off? This is about making real trade-offs visible so people can make good decisions about where to invest their effort, rather than defaulting to absorbing everything.

03

Model attunement visibly and specifically.

Mindset scales through modeling. When leaders narrate their own recalibration — "I decided this could wait until Monday because it didn't need resolution tonight" — they give everyone below them permission to exercise the same judgment. This costs nothing and changes the culture faster than any program.

High performing teams start with emotionally intelligent leaders

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