

**BEYOND
HAPPINESS:
REDEFINING
STAFF WELLBEING
AS WORKPLACE
FULFILMENT**

Dr James Lane



Dr James Lane, IESE Fellow and Executive Headteacher of St Francis de Sales Federation and St Joseph's Catholic.



Fulfilment is not about feeling good all the time; it is about knowing that your work matters, that you are growing, and that you are valued.

Introduction: The Climate of Crisis

In recent years, England's education system has become a high-stakes environment defined by intense accountability measures, performance pressures and stretched resources. Ofsted ratings and exam results have dominated school priorities, shaping a culture where staff performance is constantly scrutinised and narrowly defined. This context has placed unprecedented strain on school staff, contributing to a growing crisis in recruitment, retention and morale. In response, many schools have turned to "wellbeing" as a supposed solution. However, without a shared understanding of what wellbeing actually means, efforts have often backfired. The term has become ambiguous, even weaponised – used to pacify rather than empower. Initiatives sometimes feel performative or tokenistic, such as offering yoga sessions or staffroom biscuits, while ignoring the genuine workload concerns of staff. This lack of clarity has bred mistrust between staff and school leaders, undermining the very aim of supporting professionals in their roles.

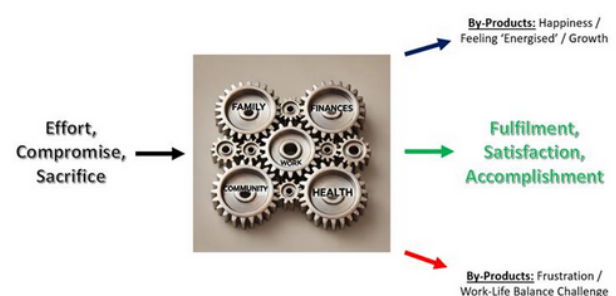
The Problem with 'Happiness' as a Goal

Too often, wellbeing is conflated with happiness – a fleeting emotional state that cannot be guaranteed or sustained in the inherently challenging work of education. Teaching is emotionally complex, intellectually demanding and administratively overloaded. Teachers and support staff are expected to manage behavioural issues, deliver engaging lessons, meet pastoral needs and navigate bureaucratic processes, all within limited time and resources; while school leaders are responsible not just for student outcomes, but also for staff morale, safeguarding, inspections and budgets. Within this challenging context, to suggest that

happiness should be the goal of workplace wellbeing is to set an impossible and infantilising standard. Instead, what school staff need is a sense of enduring purpose and contribution: workplace fulfilment. Fulfilment is the deeper, more sustainable sense of satisfaction that arises from meaningful effort, impact, and connection. It is not about feeling good all the time; it is about knowing that your work matters, that you are growing, and that you are valued. Importantly, fulfilment acknowledges the hard parts of work as intrinsic to the experience, rather than as signs of failure. In schools where wellbeing is prioritised, school leaders acknowledge their role in the shared responsibility of creating an environment of meaningful and purposeful work. Beyond the traditional and tokenistic initiatives of wellbeing, the best schools ensure staff are aligned to a clear vision of pupil welfare and that staff are trusted and valued in the organisation.

The 'Wellbeing Machine': Work as One Cog of Five

Powering the Wellbeing Machine



To understand the place of work in overall wellbeing, we can imagine a 'wellbeing machine' made up of interlocking cogs: family, finances, health, community, and work. Work is not the entire machine, but it is a significant cog – and one that school leaders can directly

influence. Acknowledging this allows leaders to focus on shaping a positive work environment without taking on responsibility for every aspect of wellbeing in an individual's life. It is foolish to expect a school leader to take on complete responsibility for an individual's workplace fulfilment – just as it would be ridiculous to expect a GP to take full responsibility for keeping someone fit and healthy. All of the cogs within the 'wellbeing machine' require the individual to exert a level of effort to be successful;

- Good health requires diet and exercise
- Strong finances require restraint and savings
- Family relationships require communication and compromise
- Community links require giving time and donations

With the concept that wellbeing is made up of multiple interconnecting elements, we begin to understand that what powers our overall wellbeing is effort, sacrifice, and resilience. It also brings about the realisation that it is the effort that leads to fulfilment – sometimes it can lead to happiness – but *real* wellbeing is about achieving meaningful outcomes through determination and resilience.

Expecting an 'easy life' or perfection in any area sets up unrealistic expectations. Just as families require compromise and health requires discipline, so too does meaningful work involve challenges and frustrations. Yet it is precisely through this meaningful effort that fulfilment is achieved. It may be true to say that if someone is not meaningfully motivated by the work they do, then there is a chance they are in the wrong work environment.

A New Definition: Workplace Fulfilment

To move the conversation beyond the imprecise term "wellbeing," a practical and actionable definition is required:

Workplace fulfilment = meaningful effort toward a shared vision, in a culture of support and growth.

Each part of this definition holds weight:

- **Meaningful effort** underscores that fulfilment is rooted in contribution, not convenience. It acknowledges the value of striving, even when the work is tough.
- **Shared vision** refers to the alignment of personal values and institutional purpose, fostering a sense of direction. Without a shared vision, even the most competent teams can become fragmented and disengaged.
- **Culture of support and growth** indicates that for fulfilment to flourish, the work environment must be trusting, developmental, and genuinely inclusive. Growth opportunities, honest feedback, and recognition are essential ingredients.

Reframing wellbeing as fulfilment shifts attention from individual emotional states to systemic and cultural enablers of thriving workplaces. It also prompts important questions: What do we value?

How do we support our people? What does success look like for our staff?

Shared Responsibility: Leadership and Staff

Workplace fulfilment is a shared responsibility. Leaders must create the conditions in which fulfilment is possible by providing clear vision, ensuring psychological safety and supporting professional development. Vision must be more than a poster on a wall; it must be lived, communicated, and integrated into daily practice. Psychological safety allows staff to express concerns, admit mistakes and share ideas without fear of ridicule or retribution. Professional development should be seen not as an event, but as a culture. Staff, in turn, are responsible for actively engaging with this vision, bringing energy and purpose to their work and nurturing a constructive workplace culture. They must hold themselves and their colleagues to account, contribute positively to team dynamics and be open to growth. When both parties embrace their roles, schools foster cycles of trust, motivation and professional pride. If either side falters, these dynamics suffer. This framework discourages both top-down micromanagement and staff disengagement, replacing them with mutual accountability and collective agency.

Implications for Educational and Social Equity

A fulfilled teaching workforce is essential to educational and social equity. In schools serving disadvantaged communities, staff stability and morale are especially critical. Burnout and attrition disproportionately affect students who already face barriers to success, resulting in further inequity. When staff are fulfilled, they are more likely to stay, more

likely to innovate and more likely to connect with students in meaningful ways. Fulfilment supports consistency, which builds trust among students and families. By foregrounding workplace fulfilment, schools can retain committed educators, cultivate inclusive practices and uphold the very equity they seek for students. Equity here also means acknowledging that different staff may require different kinds of support. Just as no student thrives in a one-size-fits-all system, neither do professionals. Fulfilment must be flexible, responsive and human centred. Schools must ask: How do we recognise diverse strengths? How do we support staff with caring responsibilities, health conditions, or marginalised identities? Equity for staff is not separate from equity for students; they are deeply intertwined.

Conclusion: Fulfilment as a Foundation for Justice

The current discourse around wellbeing is insufficient. It is vague, inconsistent and often misused. By repositioning fulfilment as the goal, we anchor staff support in clarity, structure and justice. Schools may not be able to guarantee happiness, but they can foster the conditions for fulfilment. Doing so honours all school staff not only as workers but as people and in turn, strengthens the moral and social fabric of education itself. Fulfilment is not a soft ambition; it is a necessary condition for ethical

and effective schooling. If we are serious about equity, we must be serious about staff fulfilment. It is time to move beyond slogans, and instead build schools where all adults are empowered to thrive, contribute and belong.

References

Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (2000). The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self Determination of Behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.

Fullan, M. (2020). *The Right Drivers for Whole System Success*. Centre for Strategic Education.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. Routledge.

Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead Books.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. Free Press.

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Portfolio.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2016). *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Luthans, F., Youssef, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2007). *Psychological Capital: Developing the Human Competitive Edge*. Oxford University Press.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Burnout. In G. Fink (Ed.), *Stress: Concepts, Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior*. Academic Press.

Thomson, P. (2020). *School Scandals: Blowing the Whistle on the Corruption of Our Education System*. Policy Press.

Department for Education. (2023). *Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders Survey*. Gov.uk.

Focus On

EDI ©

Disclaimer: Focus of EDI © is a brand of the Institute for Equity, University Centre. The author of this article retains copyright, and views expressed are not necessarily those of the Institute.

Citation: Lane, J. 2025 Beyond Happiness: Redefining Staff Wellbeing as Workplace Fulfilment, Focus on EDI © – Issue 5, London:, London: Institute for Equity, University Centre.