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Build Workforce Resilience by Looking Beyond Averages

by Jonah Shepp

To build resilience, HR leaders should look beyond the averages in their employee engagement and well-being data to identify which employees are struggling through disruption and which are thriving. A closer look can reveal hidden problems as well as scalable solutions at the team level.

The disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic did not affect the entire workforce equally, and some organizations, teams and individuals weathered it more successfully than others. HR leaders had anticipated a universally negative impact, but they did not predict that some employees' performance and well-being would actually improve during the disruption. As they work to build resilience in their organizations

going forward, HR leaders will benefit from understanding who struggled during this disruption, who flourished and why.

To take advantage of this insight, HR leaders must not fall into the trap of focusing on the average of all their measures of employee experience, which may not capture any individual employee's actual experience. Disruption can have widely disparate impacts

on various segments of the workforce; you can't simply address employee well-being and resilience with a one-size-fits-all approach. A strategy designed for the average employee is unlikely to succeed, because with such a wide variety of individual experiences, few employees are actually "average."
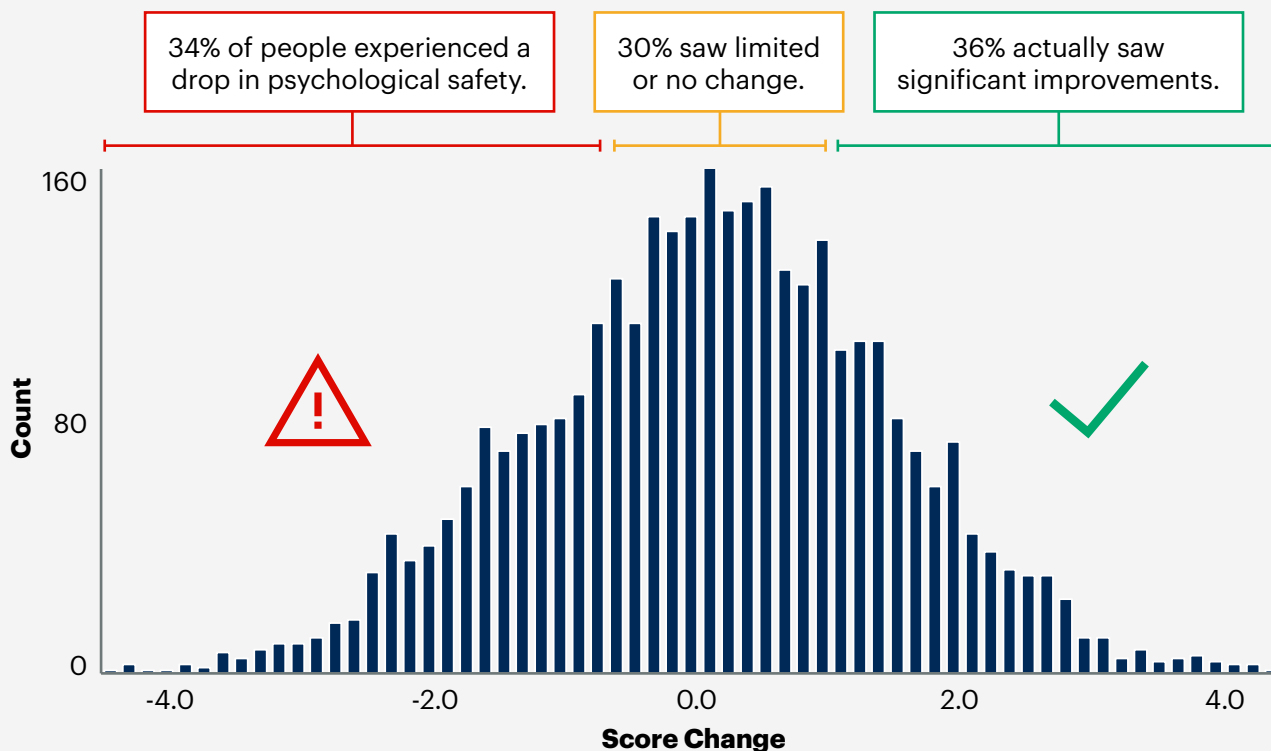
While Some Employees Thrive, Others Dive

Consider a high school class that shifted to remote learning during the pandemic. About a third of the students struggled to focus in virtual lessons, and their grade point averages declined by about 10 points. Another third found remote learning easier or had more supportive home environments, and their averages increased by the same amount. The final third of the class did about as well in the remote environment as they had in person, and their grades were about the same. If their teacher looked only at the average difference in student performance during the pandemic, they would see no change at all, but they would know from experience that the impact on individual students was enormous.
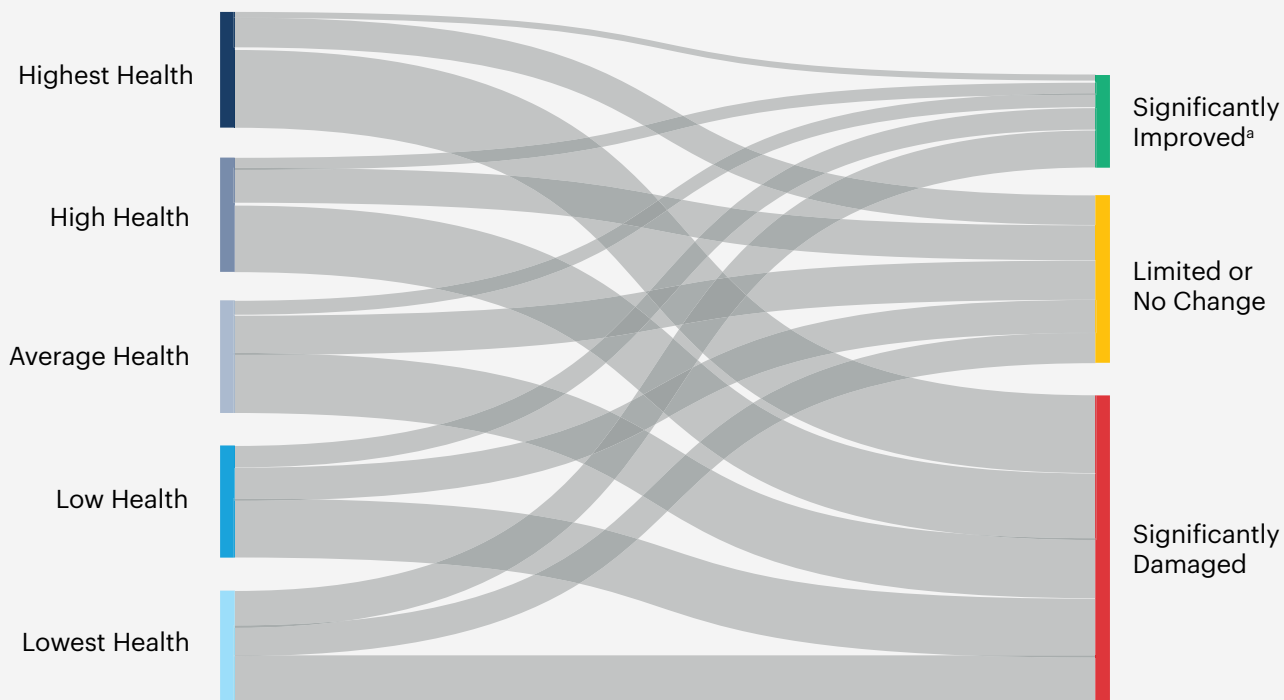
Something similar happened in the workforce over the past year in terms of the employee experience. In our recent research, we built a model of workforce health that considers 16 attributes of employees' individual well-being, work relationships and work environment.

For many of these attributes, we found a wide distribution of how employees' experiences had changed in the past year. For example, the "average employee" experienced little to no change in their sense of psychological safety at work during the pandemic. However, these average employees in the middle of the distribution only represent about 30% of the workforce (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Feelings of Psychological Safety

34% of people experienced a drop in psychological safety.

30% saw limited or no change.

36% actually saw significant improvements.

n = 3,690

Source: 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Survey

Figure 2. Chance of Thriving or Diving During Disruption by Prepandemic Health Level

Percentage of Chance

Highest Health
High Health
Average Health
Low Health
Lowest Health

Significantly Improved[a]
Limited or No Change
Significantly Damaged

n = 3,690

Source: 2021 Gartner Workforce Resilience Survey

[a] Employees in the top 15% of improvement in workforce health

Meanwhile, 34% of employees experienced a decline in psychological safety, while 36% experienced a significant increase. If HR leaders designed psychological well-being strategies based on the average employee's experience of the pandemic, they could effectively be ignoring 70% of employees.

For many employees (a plurality in this survey), the disruption had a positive impact on their psychological safety. Perhaps a shift to full-time remote work improved their work-life balance, or the reliance on virtual communication improved their sense of inclusion or ability to form social bonds with their colleagues. HR leaders' resilience plans need to account for those who have "thrived" as well as those whose well-being "dived." The steps an organization takes to limit the impact of disruption on the latter may be unnecessary or even detrimental to the former.

This distinction should factor into HR leaders' plans for the postpandemic work environment. Fifty-two percent of employees who shifted to fully remote work during the pandemic say their day-to-day experience has gotten better over the past year, while 12% say it has gotten worse.[1] Forcing all employees back to on-site work would create a worse experience for many employees, but abandoning in-person work entirely would harm those who have struggled in a remote environment.

To design an approach that supports the whole workforce, HR leaders must take into account the fact that employee experiences vary. To do so, they must dig beneath the average to see which parts of the workforce have been affected and how.

Disruption Shuffles the Deck

It is difficult to predict how various employees will be affected by a disruption. Going into the pandemic, many HR leaders assumed the employees most at risk would be those who were already struggling. However, employees' overall level of workforce health (a measure of individual well-being, healthy relationships and the work environment) prior to the pandemic did not predict whether that level improved, deteriorated or stayed the same during the pandemic. Every quintile of workforce health contained some who thrived, some who dived and some who experienced little change (see Figure 2).

In other words, disruption "shuffles the deck" when it comes to workforce health. The employees who have been thriving during and after the COVID-19 disruption are not the same ones who were thriving in the prepandemic environment. Historical well-being data is not predictive of how well employees weather a disruption.

This makes it even more challenging for HR leaders to identify pockets of resilience and vulnerability within their workforce. You can't rely on averages, and you can't predict outcomes from historical data. To learn from this disruption and build your workforce's resilience for the future, you need to take a more granular look at the impact on employees, especially on the team level.

National Bank of Canada's Resilience-Diagnosis Support

During the pandemic, National Bank of Canada's (NBC's) employee engagement survey found high levels of engagement, low levels of stress and high morale. These findings were somewhat surprising, as they conflicted with anecdotal evidence that some employees were really struggling. This is a common story at many organizations: Survey data tells a positive or neutral story about employee engagement and well-being that conflicts with what HR leaders and managers are seeing on the ground.

The bank's talent analytics team suspected the topline data might mask a more complicated reality, so it dug deeper. Building on the questions in the engagement survey, NBC deployed context-specific pulse surveys to ask more specific questions and track employees' responses over time. By observing where engagement and morale were increasing or decreasing, NBC identified pockets of thriving and diving within the organization. It then developed hypotheses about why some employees were challenged and others were more resilient.

In testing those hypotheses, the talent analytics team at NBC found that within groups that seemed to be doing well overall, more specific subgroups were struggling. For example, young people on average seemed to enjoy working remotely, but employees under 35 who live

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alone were reporting the lowest morale in the organization. Employees with children appeared resilient overall, but parents of preschoolers were experiencing high stress. Had NBC only looked at the first cut of the data, these employees' challenges would have remained invisible to HR.

The next step was to find solutions to help the employees who were struggling. NBC chose not to focus on individual resilience, which is often determined by factors the organization (and sometimes even the employee) can't control. For example, there is no way to change the fact that some employees have preschool-aged children, and expecting these employees to change their individual behavior to become more resilient is neither scalable nor particularly fair.

Instead, NBC considered resilience on the team level. Instead of asking, "What are the characteristics of a resilient employee?" the analytics team asked, "What differentiates our resilient teams from those that are taking damage?"

Figure 3. National Bank of Canada's Team-Level Solutions Identification
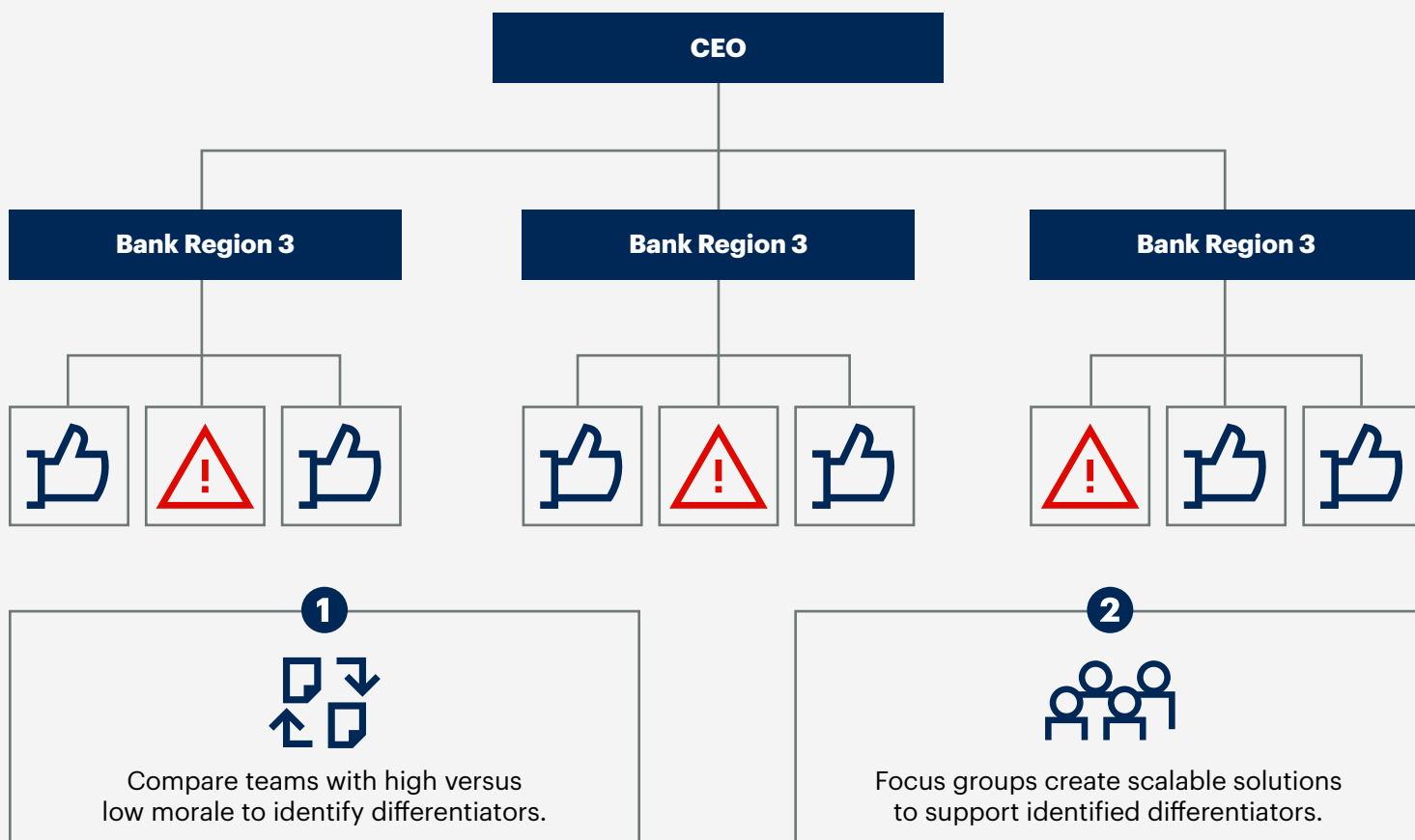
Source: Adapted From National Bank of Canada

NBC started by comparing teams with high and low levels of morale to identify differentiators common to highly resilient teams. These differentiators were fairly standard measures of good management, such as open and transparent communication or empowerment to make decisions, but identifying them allowed NBC to focus on specific practices that had the greatest impact on resilience at the organization. Once NBC identified these differentiators, it gathered focus groups of employees from across the organization to work out steps the organization could take to make these differentiators a reality in context (see Figure 3).

This way, NBC took advantage of what was already working in the organization and involved employees directly in duplicating and scaling these solutions. The results so far are encouraging, as most employees said the resilience-diagnosis support initiative improved agility, productivity and empowerment at the bank.

From Individuals to Teams

One reason why NBC's initiative is so compelling is because it challenges the conventional wisdom about how to measure and promote resilience in an organization. In a traditional approach, measurements are often too broad and solutions too narrow. If you look only at topline averages, you lose important nuances in the data at the team and business unit level. If you focus interventions only on individual employees, you end up chasing outcomes you can't control and missing out on more viable solutions. A better approach to resilience looks past the averages to identify pockets of resilience and vulnerability within the workforce and what characteristics are associated with resilience at the team level, where interventions can often have the greatest impact.

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