

The wake-up call: why leader wellbeing may be HR’s next blind spot

Leaders don't just feel worse. Their shadow falls over everyone they lead.

WHAT IT IS

Every leader casts a shadow - through what they say, do, prioritise and measure, whether they intend to or not. It's more powerful in shaping how teams think, feel and behave than any strategy document or policy, because people respond to what they see leaders notice, value, reward and role-model, not to what's written down.

GLWS's adaptation - the leadership wellbeing shadow - adds a dimension the original model leaves implicit: the leader's own wellbeing as a determinant of the shadow they cast. Improving leaders' wellbeing and improving wellbeing leadership are inseparable - leaders cannot sustainably give others what they don't have themselves.

THE DATA

Wellbeing by seniority	Work	Life
Individual contributors	3.78	3.81
Leaders	3.63	3.71
Managers	3.49	3.62

p<0.00001 (work), p<0.0002 (life). Individual contributors report meaningfully higher wellbeing than both leaders and managers.

By people-management responsibility	At work	Outside
Manages others	3.43	3.59
Does not manage others	3.65	3.77

p<0.001 (both measures). Source for both tables: GLWS® benchmark dataset, 9,986 professionals, ~70% Australian, independently validated by the University of Melbourne.

WHAT EXTERNAL RESEARCH SAYS

- McQuaid & Williams (2023), *Your Leadership Blueprint: Fostering Psychosocial Safety at Work* - leader psychosocial safety is an organisational risk in its own right.
- Dulal-Arthur et al. (2024), *J. of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* - line manager mental health and presenteeism directly affects team outcomes.
- Kuehnl et al. (2019), *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* - supervisor training reviewed for its effect on employee health and wellbeing.
- Lavoie et al. (2026), *McKinsey Quarterly*, "How leaders can help their organizations metabolize strain" - leader strain is now a live business concern.
- WorkWell Leaders & National University of Singapore (2025) - leader wellbeing is the single strongest driver of organisational wellbeing.

SIX DRIVERS OF THE GAP

- More work-life balance and boundary violations (p<0.00001)
- Greater work spillover into personal life (p<0.00001)
- Higher burnout risk from workload pressure (p<0.00001)
- More distraction by work with family/friends (p<0.00001)
- Workday as a "race against the clock" (p<0.00001)
- Higher work-related stress and anxiety (p=0.001)

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

- An upstream blind spot** - most organisations measure employee wellbeing and psychosocial risk, but far fewer measure leader wellbeing with the same discipline.
- A performance and culture issue** - overloaded, anxious or depleted leaders show it in decision-making, engagement, risk culture and productivity.
- A talent pipeline risk** - emerging talent may be less willing to step into roles where senior people are visibly overloaded.
- An AI-transformation pressure point** - depleted leaders have limited capacity to sustain performance while leading AI-enabled change.