

Embedding Mental Health and Well-Being in Legal Organizations: Strategies for Leadership

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The legal profession is reaching a pivotal moment in how it understands mental health. For a long time, conversations about stress, burnout, anxiety and depression were avoided or quietly pushed aside. That's beginning to change. More lawyers and legal organizations are acknowledging that these struggles are real—and that ignoring them only deepens the problem. Today, there's a growing recognition that well-being isn't separate from professional success; it's what allows lawyers to serve their clients, colleagues and communities with clarity and integrity. Recent research has highlighted both the depth of the challenge and the opportunity it brings: to reshape the culture of law into one that values balance, compassion and sustainable excellence. The shift won't happen overnight, but it's already underway. By replacing silence with openness and stigma with support, the profession is taking meaningful steps toward a healthier, more resilient future.

In 2018, the ABA House of Delegates published Resolution 105, which in part, supported the reduction of mental health and substance use disorders and the improvement of well-being in the legal profession. Soon thereafter, the Working Group to Advance Well-Being in the Legal Profession published the ABA Well-Being Pledge, making clear that organizations needed



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to treat attorney mental health and well-being as an ethical imperative.

This article first discusses this foundational imperative and then offers four practical strategies to help GCs and CLOs drive the necessary cultural shift to foster healthier teams, build stronger organizations and ensure a more sustainable profession.

Foundational Principle: Well-Being as an Ethical Imperative

Lawyer well-being is not simply a perk; it is an integral component of professional competence and client protection. Indeed, solid mental fitness speaks directly to our professional obligations and sits as a cornerstone of job satisfaction, productivity and

advancement. No longer simply a “nice to have,” well-being is instead an ethical imperative.

For almost a decade, the ABA has invited legal organizations to focus on attorney well-being and urged the profession to remove the stigma of mental health and engage in the national conversation about the topic intentionally and actively. Resolution 105, in fact, paved the way for the ABA Well-Being Pledge, which set out a specific seven-point framework for attorney well-being and, importantly, framed attorney wellbeing as inseparable from competence. Even the Model Rules make this connection clear: Rule 1.1 (competence) requires cognitive and emotional fitness, not just technical knowledge. Rule 1.3 (diligence) requires we act with promptness and focus, unhindered by exhaustion, distraction or burnout. And Rules 8.3 and 8.4 (reporting/misconduct) highlight that any professional failure, including lapses caused by poor mental health, give rise to professional risk if left unaddressed.

Although the 2018 ABA report targeted legal organizations, like law firms and law schools, its findings applied equally to in-house legal departments where attorneys often face “well-being” programs shaped by broader organizational drivers and a more varied employee population. What emerged, therefore, was an industry-wide understanding that true ethical leadership required culture change: realistic staffing and timelines, psychologically safe teams, emotionally intelligent management and early identification and referral when colleagues struggle. In other words, cosmetic perks like “Mindfulness Mondays” or smoothie bars, while positive steps, cannot by themselves remedy workload strain or poor supervision and will not suffice in addressing attorney mental health struggles.

Seen this way, attorney well-being must function within the broader context of risk management and professional responsibility and, if treated as an ethical imperative, will open the door to more helpful and lasting change.

Strategy 1: Adopt the ABA Well-Being Pledge Framework

The ABA Well-Being Pledge, signed by more than two hundred legal employers, supplies a shared framework for change. Within its seven core commitments, the Pledge emphasizes education, confidential resources, visible leadership support, and measurement. For inhouse departments, the Pledge is most effective when woven into operations:

- **Audit workload and staffing:** align matter timelines with capacity; track peak periods; prevent chronic overassignment; avoid valorizing overwork.
- **Diversify social rituals:** do not center relationship building around alcohol.
- **Map and publicize support:** ensure easy access to confidential crisis resources, like Lawyer Assistance Programs (LAPs); normalize their use.
- **Measure and report:** set metrics for resource utilization, retention, near-miss/error reporting, and referrals; review them with leadership.

By normalizing help-seeking and by removing barriers rooted in stigma, GCs and CLOs can move their organizations beyond abstract ethics and into true and sustainable cultural change.

Strategy 2: Lead with Transformational Leadership Principles

Policies set expectations; leadership behavior sets culture. Transformational leadership advances well-being through four habits, none of which need be resource intensive or formally programmatic:

- **Idealized Influence** — model boundaries and rest; protect quiet hours; avoid unnecessary late-night emails.
- **Inspirational Motivation** — connect work to purpose to counter cynicism and fatigue. Burn-out, after all, arises not from hard work, but from a loss of purpose.
- **Individualized Consideration** — calibrate assignments to capacity; notice warning signs; create routine, candid check-ins.
- **Intellectual Stimulation** — encourage creativity and problem-solving; invite process improvements that reduce attorney work friction and stress.

Importantly, a true wellness culture requires commitment and action, not simply “paper policies.” When

leaders actively engage, teams do not just function, they flourish.

Strategy 3: Build Trust and Psychological Safety

Without trust, programs underperform. And trust formed above a net of psychological safety creates confidence that one can ask for help, surface risks, and propose changes without penalty. Building teams based on psychological safety means, among other things, creating a space where people feel supported and are expected to bring their best. Importantly, psychological safety can and must coexist with high standards, as the former is not in conflict with professional excellence; it is the path towards it.

In practice, leaders must keep promises, listen fully, credit others, and encourage accountability without blame. After all, trust and accountability are not at odds but rather reinforce each other as the bridge from policy to culture. People should be able to say, "I'm overwhelmed right now," without fearing backlash. They should understand that asking for help is not a step back, but a stride forward. Leaders must model these beliefs and this behavior to ensure operational resiliency.

Strategy 4: Leverage Resources and Partnerships

In-house leaders need not build everything alone. To develop effective well-being programs and safe, psychological cultures, GCs and CLOs can partner with outside law firms or look to other outside organizations, such as the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP), the Institute for WellBeing in Law (IWIL), and state LAPs, for confidential support, training, and policy templates. With these resources, leaders can initiate change slowly and modestly, and tailor approaches to the team realities (considering time zones, cultural norms, and remote work situations).

By leveraging partnerships, legal leaders can amplify their impact and show their teams that well-being is

not just an internal priority but part of a larger professional movement. True cultural change begins like that: one team, one conversation, one step at a time.

Conclusion

Attorney mental health and well-being is no longer a discretionary benefit, but an ethical imperative intertwined with competence and diligence. By adopting the ABA Pledge, modeling transformational leadership, building trust and psychological safety, and leveraging external partners, GCs and CLOs can replace performative fixes with true structural change. As legal departments face rapid technological shifts, rising client demands, and increasing global complexity, advantage will be shaped by leaders recognizing that attorney well-being is not separate from performance, but central to it. Investment in attorney mental fitness, therefore, will help leaders respond to the pressure of today and better meet the challenges of tomorrow.

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