

**Speech by SkyCity Entertainment Group Chair, Rob Campbell  
At the launch of the Protecting Mental Wellbeing at Work Guide  
SkyCity, Auckland, 28 April 2021**

Kia ora tatou.

For me to be speaking on mental wellbeing is rather like having a celibate priest speaking on sex. You may well think that I often speak on things which I know nothing about. If so, I'm meeting your expectations today. I have never experienced mental wellbeing in my life and at this point in my life it is probably not going to happen. But I can share some war stories and having been in the mental health trenches I have been motivated to think about mental health and work. So here goes.

Like a great many so-called "business leaders" I have substituted being busy for being healthy and I have admired and rewarded others for doing the same. The reasons for this are not simply greed or ambition. Often, we do so, as I have, to escape from the dreadful reality of how we see ourselves. We may often claim some higher purpose such as for family, community, or belief in product but mostly we have succeeded within the narrow limits of how we have defined success in a vain attempt to obscure or cure our internal doubts and fears.

There are plenty of more socially and personally worthwhile activities than what we all currently do. We choose not to do them. We live in what Bruce Springsteen called the "darkness at the edge of town ... where no one asks any questions or looks too long in your face". The darkness at the edge of town is both physical for those who go racing in the streets and metaphor, inside the mind, where "everybody's got a secret/something that they just can't face/ Some folks spend their whole lives trying to keep it/ they carry it with them every step that they take".

In my case I have a level of introversion which is pretty extreme and a level of unipolar depression which has defied drugs, psychologists, partners, family, colleagues, friends and me in equal measure for six decades. So, if you think I am avoiding you some time or taking too negative a view on a topic you are probably

right. Incidentally, we depressives think we are simply being realistic and the rest of you are floating high on a dangerous drug of exuberance. You can see why diversity is important.

But this is not about me. Today is about recognising that each day in our workplaces we all create and recreate a significant part of our consciousness of ourselves as people. How we structure our work, what we do, how we interact with others in the workplace is not a neutral thing. It is laden with symbolic and practical limitations, incentives, rewards and perils, with inequities, exercise of power and expression. There is fun, connection and satisfaction but also threat, alienation, and distress.

We do not all experience these things in the same way. But a great deal of the way we organise our workplaces assumes that we do. From the way we categorise jobs, to the patterns of working hours we expect, to the way we pay people, through to titles, or how we greet each other, we exist in most of our workplaces in a monoculture which starting our emails with “kia ora” and having 40/40/20 gender mixes on the board may obscure but does not change.

One of the great challenges of diversity and inclusion is ironically but simply that we are so diverse. It's a challenge even when we do try. It may suit the power point presentation to lump together a huge chunk of the world's population into a category like “Asian” but it is less than imperfect for Koreans and Indians. It may make sense from some perspective to treat “Pasifika” along with “Maori” but there are differences between Niuean and Ngai Tahu. Gender, we slowly realise, is not as binary as many assumed. You get the picture. Diversity is difficult. Suck it up. Deal with it.

We largely try to fit people to jobs not vice versa and guess what, often they don't fit. They experience their time in the workplace as stressful, try to make it work because they need the money, think they are the odd one out, or simply think that this is what work is supposed to be about. They do not experience work as a rewarding self-actualisation no matter what box they tick on the pulse survey. Stress morphs into distress. They take that home, every step that they take. And the pattern deepens and grows at the home. They are not well.

Or maybe it happens in reverse. The home relationship is broken in some way. The wider whanau carries many seeds of personal or cultural conflict, loss, or grief past and present. And the person brings that within them on the bus to the factory or parks their new car before ascending to their nice office, into the workplace where they do not lose that set of thoughts and emotions but apply and foster that thing that they just cannot face. They are not well. Nor, too often, is their workplace.

One word for this is that we are alienated. Karl Marx observed this quite early in the history of our current forms of economic activity, recognising that people within this form of economic activity were alienated from nature and their own mental life. Some cope with this better than others, just as animals in a cage do. This happens not just for workers but also for bosses and investors, which Marx recognised in a tract called "The Holy Family". But each experiences this alienation (this lack of wholeness) in different ways. You will recall that neither Scrooge McDuck nor Mr Burns from the Simpsons portray mental wellbeing. They are not well. We are not well. Our practices at work can and thankfully often do ameliorate the impact of this. But we have a great deal more to do to really humanise our workplaces in ways which not only cope with difference and dignity, but which allow and encourage them to flourish.

When the process of economic activity is separated from the process of simply being human this causes real stress to the human. As we have reaped the economic growth benefits of this form of economic activity and some have reaped the financial benefits of it, we ignored that damage to ourselves as people just as we ignored the damage to nature. But whether you see the process as karma or as chickens coming home to roost, there is indeed "no free lunch" and we count the costs in Prozac prescriptions, suicide statistics, and poor productivity.

Fortunately, the organisers of this event were kind enough to be explicit that they were not looking to me for solutions. That is above what at least ought to be my pay grade. But this is an opportunity to join the call for mental wellbeing to be treated as an important issue for all of us with leadership roles in business. I have no doubt in my mind that we all perform our work better if we are mentally well. More importantly we will contribute more positively to the people around us.

In simple terms we can only have genuine mental wellbeing which is shared. It is a vital part of being fit for the future – only if we treat our business as fully integrated with all stakeholder interests, all of the various capitals we embody, can we expect to have mental wellbeing. The Latin expression “mens sana in corpore sano” or “healthy mind in healthy body” applies also to the corporate body.

Not only should we recognise mental wellbeing as important in our business, we should act to support those experiencing the extremes of poor mental wellbeing, be rigorous in questioning and testing how our business is contributing to poor mental wellbeing, and be prepared to change for the better. This is not a matter of nice words and photos in our annual reports or corporate award ceremonies, but the demanding daily work of doing better in order to be better. I’m pretty sure that this will be lead by the people we employ if we allow, encourage and enable them to do so. We will have to give up some old practices and probably power and privilege but it will be worth it

I started with quoting a hymn from Bruce Springsteen written I believe in 1976. His hero was alienated, alone and haunted in the darkness. It is a pretty grim view but it is the reality for too many of us, far more than admit that reality to themselves or to others. Despair and inaction are twins. So are hope and change. To that more optimistic end I will go back another century to lyrics from 1876 in a hymn by Horatio Spafford. The hauntingly beautiful repetition of “It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul”. That is where we all want to be.