

# Building BRIDGES: Mentoring Within the Total Worker Health® Model

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As Oregon's not-for-profit workers' compensation insurance company, SAIF's vision is to make Oregon the safest and healthiest place to work. As an example to fellow Oregon employers, SAIF implements the Total Worker Health model. SAIF's BRIDGES mentoring program represents one component within the model, which prioritizes holistic employee wellbeing. This model integrates workplace safety and health promotion, addressing physical, emotional, social, environmental, occupational, intellectual, and financial aspects of health. Furthermore, SAIF fosters employee development and wellbeing through a mentoring framework that includes strengths-based assessments and reflective practices. The program supports employees in personal and professional development, enhancing overall engagement with the organization and job satisfaction through a structured mentorship, a cohort community, and personalized development plans. Preliminary outcomes of this mixed-methods program evaluation indicate increased employee engagement and reported wellbeing support. Moreover, the discussion highlights the impact of intentional community building efforts on these outcomes, which provides insights into the effectiveness of the Total Worker Health model in promoting a supportive and productive work environment.

*Keywords:* Total Worker Health, dimensions of wellbeing, worker wellbeing, social isolation, corporate mentoring.

## Introduction

Many components of modern life have led to an increase in social isolation, a decrease in work-life balance, and a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these problems (Hall et al., 2024). People spend an increasing amount of time at their workplace each week, so, unsurprisingly, it creates a rising interest in how workplaces affect worker wellbeing. This analysis explores the link between mentoring programs and worker wellbeing while connecting best practices that support this connection.

## Literature review

### What is Total Worker Health?

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines Total Worker Health as "policies, programs, and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury and illness prevention efforts to advance worker wellbeing" (Hudson et al., 2016, p.1). Prior to 2018, worker well-being was not clearly defined, due to its developing field of research. NIOSH developed a Worker Wellbeing Framework, which includes five domains: Workplace Physical Environment and Safety Climate; Workplace Policies and Culture;

Health Status; Work Evaluation and Experience; and Home, Community, and Society (Chari et al., 2018).

### Eight Dimensions of Wellbeing

There are eight interdependent dimensions of wellbeing, which include physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, occupational, financial, and environmental wellness (Stoewen, 2017). Mentoring efforts are most likely to positively support intellectual, occupational, and social wellbeing, but there is no current link in the literature between these. Stoewen (2017) defines intellectual wellbeing as "growing intellectually, maintaining curiosity about all there is to learn, valuing lifelong learning, and responding positively to intellectual challenges. Expanding knowledge and skills while discovering the potential for sharing your gifts with others" (p. 862).

Occupational wellbeing is "preparing for and participating in work that provides personal satisfaction and life enrichment consistent with your values, goals, and lifestyle. Contributing your unique gifts, skills, and talents to work that is personally meaningful and rewarding" (Stoewen, 2017, p. 862). Finally, Stoewen defines social wellbeing as "maintaining healthy relationships, enjoying being with others, developing friendships and intimate relations, caring about

others, and letting others care about you. Contributing to your community” (2017, p. 862). Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Work Alienation The breadth of literature explores the tangible effects of loneliness, social isolation, and work alienation. A Surgeon General’s report states that “lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day,” and more dangerous than drinking six alcoholic drinks daily, physical inactivity, obesity, and air pollution (U.S. Public Health Service, 2023, pp. 24-25). Additionally, evidence exists for lower pain tolerance and more cases of chronic pain among individuals with low-quality and small social circles (Medeiros, 2023).

### **The Literature Gap**

Mentoring and coaching literature currently lacks an explicit link among corporate mentoring efforts, Total Worker Health, and worker alienation in the evolving workplace of the 21st century. As such, this paper provides additional insight into the connection between mentoring relationships and worker wellbeing, and how these connections fit within the Total Worker Health model.

## **BRIDGES Program Overview**

The BRIDGES program at SAIF follows a clear mission: building relationships and inspiring development through guidance, education, and support. The broader vision uses a comprehensive approach to nurturing employees’ talent, skills, and personal growth while supporting employee wellbeing, and the program aims to connect individuals with a network of support that includes mentoring, pathfinding, and coaching.

The foundations of the formal mentor program began when applications for the first cohort of mentors and mentees opened in October 2022. Previously, SAIF’s mentor program operated informally through listing available mentors. Mentees contacted a specific mentor if they were interested in working with them. SAIF desired to increase cross-divisional collaboration and reduce biases in selecting mentors. Additionally, the organization started a new employee mentor program that paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. When hybrid work became the standard at SAIF, it was essential to bring the program back to life with adjustments for the new workplace model.

The BRIDGES program utilizes three arches or areas of focus: mentoring (long-term, formal partnerships), pathfinding (new employee support), and coaching (short-term, formal partnerships). Under the pathfinding arch, two separate programs also exist: pathfinders for individual contributors (anyone who does not have supervisory duties) who are new to the organization, and supervisor pathfinders for

formal people leaders joining the organization or new people leaders within the organization. The coaching arch is currently in the planning stages and aims to launch in 2026.

### **Mentor Program**

Between January 2023 and April 2025, the mentor program facilitated 56 pairings between mentors and mentees looking to grow in their general career development, leadership-conflict management, leadership-team dynamics, and various skills like public speaking and data visualization. This program is opt-in, with mentors and mentees applying to be paired. The average mentee in this program has been with the organization for 5 to 10 years, with the majority, 74%, having worked at SAIF between 1 and 10 years.

### **Pathfinder Program**

Between October 2022 and April 2025, the Pathfinder program facilitated 233 pairings between new employees and tenured employees. This program is mandatory for all new employees and completely voluntary for the tenured employees who participate as the pathfinders. Participants work together for three months, and the pathfinders serve as the new employees’ first connections to someone outside their division. Each pathfinder is provided with a conversation guide to help structure their sessions with their mentee. Pathfinders strive to provide social support and help mentees locate the workplace resources they need. Also, they help integrate new employees into our organization’s culture, which fits the framework of nurturing employee wellbeing under Total Worker Health.

### **Supervisor Pathfinder Program**

Between January 2023 and April 2025, the supervisor pathfinder program facilitated 62 pairings between supervisors who are either new to the organization or new to supervision and tenured supervisors. The organization mandates this program for all new supervisors. Participants in this program work together for 12 months and simultaneously go through a structured learning pathway. This program aims to provide social support for those who are new to the organization, help mentees understand the organization’s supervision model, and integrate new employees into the organization’s culture.

## **Methodology**

This study uses a mixed-methods program evaluation to assess the BRIDGES program’s impact on employee engagement and wellbeing. Quantitative data

This program review also utilizes data from the annual employee engagement survey, developed and administered by DecisionWise,

an independent research organization. DecisionWise keeps individual survey data confidential. The survey includes 12 themes, with this study focusing on four: connection, impact, enablement, and growth. Sample statements for

these themes are provided in Table 1. Employees respond on a five-point Likert scale, with options ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree,” with an option for neutral.

**Table 1.**  
*Sample Survey Measures*

Theme	# of questions	Sample statements
Connection	5	“I feel like a valued part of my workgroup.” “I feel comfortable in SAIF’s culture.” “I feel like I belong here.”
Impact	7	“My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.” “I can see a clear link between my work and SAIF’s mission, vision, and values.” “Most days, I feel like I am making progress on important work projects or initiatives.” “I see a clear link between our team’s efforts and the success of SAIF.”
Enablement	5	“My job allows me to maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life.” “I have the tools and resources I need to do my job well.” “SAIF cares about my safety and well-being.”
Growth	5	“I feel challenged and stretched in my job in a way that results in personal growth.” “I am satisfied with the opportunities for my own professional growth at SAIF.” “There are opportunities for my own advancement at SAIF.”

**Qualitative data**

Participant comments were collected through experience surveys sent during and after program participation. The Mentor program utilizes Microsoft Forms that keep answers anonymous, sending an eight-question mid-point survey. Respondents have two logistical questions, two experience rating questions, and four free-response questions. At the end of their cohort, mentors and mentees receive another survey with 15 questions, including two logistical questions, 10 Likert scale questions, and three free-response questions. The Pathfinder programs also utilize Microsoft Forms and send post-program surveys to both pathfinders and pathfindees. Both contain 10 questions but are tailored to the audience. Pathfindees answer two logistical questions, four rating questions, and four free-response questions, while pathfinders answer five logistical questions and five open-ended questions.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns related to intellectual, social, and occupational wellbeing.

**Results**

**Improved Employee Engagement**

Between 2021 and 2024, employee engagement scores increased across the organization, and overall favorability increased 3% between 2022 and 2024. The most significant gains appeared in the enablement and growth themes, with an increase of five points and three points, respectively. For all four themes combined, % unfavorable decreased six points, % neutral decreased five points, and % favorable grew 11 points. The decreases in unfavorability and neutrality are important because moving the needle with those groups is challenging. See the results by theme and year in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Employee Engagement Survey Results by Theme and Year

Theme		2021	2022	2024	Total change
Connection	% favorable	85	84	86	+1 point
	% neutral	11	11	10	-1 point
	% unfavorable	4	5	4	0 points
Impact	% favorable	82	83	84	+2 points
	% neutral	13	12	12	-1 point
	% unfavorable	5	5	4	-1 point
Enablement	% favorable	78	80	83	+5 points
	% neutral	14	12	11	-3 points
	% unfavorable	8	8	6	-2 points
Growth	% favorable	72	72	75	+3 points
	% neutral	17	17	17	0 points
	% unfavorable	11	11	8	-3 points

### Connection

Two of the statements from the connection theme, “I feel comfortable in SAIF’s culture” and “I feel like I belong here,” gained four and five points, respectively, between 2022 and 2024.

### Impact

Favorability with the statement, “I see a clear link between our team’s efforts and the success of SAIF,” grew by five points between 2021 and 2024.

### Enablement

From 2022 to 2024, favorability with the statement, “My job allows me to maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life,” rose by six points.

### Growth

Two of the growth theme statements, “I am satisfied with the opportunities for my own professional growth at SAIF” and “There are opportunities for my own advancement at SAIF,” saw a favorability increase of six points and five points, respectively, between 2022 and 2024.

### Supporting Dimensions of Wellbeing

SAIF’s Total Worker Health strategy is to build a culture that engages SAIF employees in various programs to improve their overall health and wellbeing. Organization programs and resources focus on seven wellbeing dimensions: physical, emotional, intellectual, social, environmental, occupational, and financial. Through an exploration of participant comments, the next section of this paper highlights how the BRIDGES program supports three of the eight dimensions of wellbeing: intellectual, social, and occupational.

#### Intellectual Wellbeing

A supervisor pathfinder (mentor) shared about the benefits they experienced, saying: “I’ve also learned a great deal from the colleagues I’m mentoring. They have experiences, and they share those with me, which benefits me to see things from a different perspective and different ways of doing things.”

Another individual contributor pathfinder shared their experiences with the program,

demonstrating the program's impact on their intellectual wellbeing:

"It was great. I really find it rewarding to connect with coworkers in entirely different fields. It's wonderful to not only learn more about them and their field, but to be a continued resource for them. I really value that responsibility."

### **Social Wellbeing**

Several comments the program team has received demonstrate how the program supports participants' social wellbeing:

"[My pathfinder] went above and beyond to help me acclimate to a new job. She was very dependable and quick to respond to any of my questions."

The Supervisor Pathfinder Program has been incredibly helpful... My pathfinder has created a supportive space for me to ask questions, provided essential information, suggested areas of growth and training, and made me feel welcomed as a new employee."

### **Occupational Wellbeing**

One mentor/mentee pairing was previously partnered in the Pathfinder program before it was paused. Each of them later joined the mentor program, with the pathfinder becoming the mentee and the pathfindee becoming the mentor. The mentor encourages others to participate:

If you have a few hours a month to spare, it's an incredible way to spend your time. If you're a leader and you can pass on your experiences to someone else, it creates exponential growth in the organization. Even if you're not a leader, you might have the nugget of wisdom that someone else is seeking."

The mentee shared that:

[My mentor] felt that I could ask [my supervisor] these difficult questions and handle the feedback. He helped me see some of the value of who I am. It was worth it, as it opened doors to my supervisor and director and built relationships and communication."

This pairing demonstrates mentoring relationships' impacts on an employee's occupational wellbeing.

## **Discussion**

### **Essential Support: The Importance of Building Community**

One aspect of the program that participants praise is monthly roundtables, with separate sessions for the different groups within the program: mentors, mentees, pathfinders, and supervisor pathfinders. These 30-minute sessions support both social and intellectual wellbeing by creating a space for participants to

gather with others in the same roles within the program to connect socially, share successes, discuss common challenges, build community, and share knowledge.

Although this was not part of the program's initial launch, the roundtables were incorporated through the iterative improvement process that the program leadership implemented. The impacts of workplace loneliness and alienation include higher prevalence of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions (Stanescu, 2024), along with reduced job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, and work performance (Even, 2021). The team observed that while these pairings were established, participants still experienced isolation. Building more community opportunities to strengthen the program and its participants was critical. In hybrid workplaces, intentional opportunities for employees to come together and engage with each other are essential to nurturing worker wellbeing.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

Several other programs, such as increasing affinity and employee resource groups, could contribute to higher employee engagement scores. The end of the COVID-19 pandemic phase could also affect employee engagement scores, as more employees returned to their everyday lives, both personally and professionally. The engagement scores represent the entire organization, not only the BRIDGES program participants.

Studies should be undertaken to evaluate physical health changes pre- and post-participation in a mentoring program to see definitive evidence of its impacts on an employee's total wellbeing. Controls should be implemented to rule out other potential impacts on any physical health changes found. This research would add further proof of mentoring's positive wellbeing effects.

### **Conclusion**

Mentoring programs, including mentors for new employees and new supervisors, improve employee engagement and retention, and support multiple dimensions of wellbeing, such as intellectual, social, and occupational. Thus, they are an effective component to consider when implementing a Total Worker Health program or initiative in an organization.

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