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Working Well: Lili Hall Of KNOCK On How Companies Are Creating Cultures That Support & Sustain Mental, Emotional, Social, Physical & Financial Wellness

An Interview with Karen Mangia



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While leadership teams may ideate countless ways to improve their workplace, the most effective way to improve any culture is by listening to those who comprise it. Culture can't be forced — it's built naturally and equally by both workplace veterans and entry-level employees. Leaders, ask your direct reports how they're doing; what they need; what programs and initiatives they'd like to see implemented. Each work environment is unique — give space for employees to actively shape yours.



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he pandemic pause brought us to a moment of collective reckoning about what it means to live well and to work well. As a result, employees are sending employers an urgent signal that they are no longer willing to choose one — life or work — at the cost of the other. Working from home brought life literally into our work. And as the world now goes hybrid, employees are drawing firmer boundaries about how much of their work comes into their life. Where does this leave employers? And which perspectives and programs contribute most to progress? In our newest interview series, Working Well: How Companies Are Creating Cultures That Support & Sustain Mental, Emotional, Social, Physical & Financial Wellness, we are talking to successful executives, entrepreneurs, managers, leaders, and thought leaders across all industries to share ideas about how to shift company cultures in light of this new expectation. We're discovering strategies and steps employers and employees can take together to live well and to work well.

Lili Hall is the founder, CEO and President of KNOCK, inc., a Minneapolis-based independent creative agency leading strategic brand development and design thinking on a national and international scale. Fluent in English and Portuguese, Hall was born in Chicago to a Brazilian mother and an Irish American father and lived as a young girl in Recife, Brazil before moving to Minneapolis to attend high school. Named one of EY's Entrepreneurial Winning Women, Most Admired CEO by Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal, nominated for the Top 50 Women Entrepreneurs of 2022 by Women We Admire and a finalist for EY's Entrepreneurs of the Year® 2022 Heartland award, Lili measures success not only in the culture, growth and profitability of her company, but in the impact it makes on communities — both at home and around the world.

Thank you for making time to visit with us about the topic of our time. Our readers would like to get to know you better. Tell us about a formative experience that prompted you to change your relationship with work and how work shows up in your life.

T *foundationally. I was raised by a Brazilian mother whose culture values the*



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entrepreneurial way of being and doing. The disciplines of work and life are not that easily distinguished. Where my life empowers my work, and my work empowers my life.

Every day is a formative, integrative opportunity to partner with colleagues, clients and employees. The pandemic, particularly, taught me that as a company, we can be even more trusting by empowering people to reimagine “how” they work: to exist beyond being in the same physical space. Now, a conference room and a virtual Zoom are both effective for ideating, creating, and delivering solutions. If there is a gift to be had from this pandemic journey, it is that we have greater respect for each other working together.

Harvard Business Review predicts that wellness will become the newest metric employers will use to analyze and to assess their employees’ mental, physical and financial health. How does your organization define wellness, and how does your organization measure wellness?

Wellness is in large part about creating balance in our lives. It’s an opportunity to find our center in mind, body and spirit — to be fully present to ourselves and to each other in both our jobs and in our lives. While it is always a work in progress, KNOCK has pioneered a foundational sense of purpose and an actionable set of values that are the guardrails that hold us all together in a spirit of solidarity.

Our purpose: KNOCK designs experiences that matter: to our clients, to our world, to one another.

The “matter” part gives meaning to our work and to our lives as employees. This includes our tremendous outreach in the nonprofit space, serving causes (oftentimes pro bono) that support our passions while serving the community.

Our values: Be Wise, Be Kind, Be Curious, Be Collaborative, Be Exceptional.

Each week we honor one individual in the company who exhibits our values in a particularly extraordinary way. It validates our roles in the agency and our ultimate well-being as a productive, empowered culture.



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A healthy workforce begets a healthier company. It's a fluid, ongoing progress that's cumulative and exponential. When everyone is respected for their role and supports the same agency goal, we are all better because of it. This can only manifest in a more productive, profitable company.

Even though most leaders have good intentions when it comes to employee wellness, programs that require funding are beholden to business cases like any other initiative. The World Health Organization estimates for every \$1 invested into treatment for common mental health disorders, there is a return of \$4 in improved health and productivity. That sounds like a great ROI. And, yet many employers struggle to fund wellness programs that seem to come “at the cost of the business.” What advice do you have to offer to other organizations and leaders who feel stuck between intention and impact?

All leaders at the organization need to be aligned with the messaging of how to support people at the organization. If one leader is not aligned and behaves differently, the messaging will fall apart, and people will lose trust in the organization.

If leaders are feeling stuck, consider that previously, employee wellness focused on physical wellness. The focus on mental wellness is an adjustment, and we as leaders are still learning how to adapt. Mental wellness is more difficult to measure, so leaders need to be intentional and contemplate appropriate methods of tracking.

For example, it is more difficult to check in on body language remotely, and HR and privacy rules tend to dictate how we reach out to and support people. We have methods for communicating and responding to someone in a physical health crisis, but we are still determining best practices for responding to employees who may or may not be managing a mental health crisis.

Companies can provide mental health support to all employees, including building trust and then checking in with people. At KNOCK we've also implemented surveys, a buddy system, workshops-coaching sessions and hiring consultants for an outside opinion.



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Meanwhile, if people believe that a work environment is enabling rather than challenging their wellness, they will be loyal to a company.

Speaking of money matters, a recent Gallup study reveals employees of all generations rank wellbeing as one of their top three employer search criteria. How are you incorporating wellness programs into your talent recruitment and hiring processes?

As an independently owned agency (who's not beholden to "big brother"), we start by communicating our purpose and values early on in discussions so people can understand the foundational spirit of a healthy company. This is clearly differentiating, and we are demonstrating our wellbeing by being equitable and fair in our salaries and benefits package, as further proven by our retention. Collectively it contributes to a healthy way of doing business. Additionally, we talk about the various wellness offerings and health insurance packages enveloped in an open, horizontal culture where everyone is valued for their role.

We've all heard of the four-day work week, unlimited PTO, mental health days, and on demand mental health services. What innovative new programs and pilots are you launching to address employee wellness? And, what are you discovering? We would benefit from an example in each of these areas.

1. Mental Wellness:

- We provide access to 24/7 mental health services.

2. Emotional Wellness:

- We allow PTO for "I need a day". People don't need to describe *why*. They can call it a "mental health day" but don't have to be that specific.
- We react to the current employee culture. For example, we hosted a workshop amidst the uncertainty of 2020 which demonstrated we had more work to do. We decided to engage a coach for recurring check-ins and ongoing conversations to help people



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- We have and continue to shift our language to be increasingly inclusive.
- When we correct others, we strive to not shame others.
- We ensure our leaders are demonstrating KNOCK's values. As an example, during the annual reviews, we don't make excuses for someone who isn't demonstrating company values. Even if one person performs well, if that person is not demonstrating our values, others throughout the company lose trust. The performance and wellness of others throughout the company suffer as a result. We mitigate this by continuing the alignment of living out our values.

3. Social Wellness:

- We provide an avenue for employees to meet with an attorney for estate planning to include, health care directives and wills, reducing stress on employees and their families.
- We encourage people to share resources. We've had multiple employees start book clubs together and exchange books.
- People can choose to work remotely or at the office dependent on their personal situations and where they will be most successful/productive. Sometimes one person needs to be at the office because home is too distracting. Another person might prefer to work remotely for their emotional or mental well-being, but they attend in person for creative collaboration. We support a spectrum of workstyle preferences at KNOCK.
- During difficult times (like during the first days of the pandemic), we implemented a buddy system to check in on each other.

4. Physical Wellness:

- We partner with a chiropractor who comes on Wednesdays to address people's physical ailments. Desk jobs can cause posture issues or pain in arms, legs, back, etc. We make this possible by "trading business" with the chiropractor — a win-win!



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- We believe wellness includes financial wellness, so KNOCK provides estate planning, 401k and profit sharing. We additionally cover the cost for employees to meet with an attorney to prepare healthcare directives and wills.

Can you please tell us more about a couple of specific ways workplaces would benefit from investing in your ideas above to improve employee wellness?

When the workplace invests in the people, the people feel more supported and willing to invest in the workplace. People invest through their productivity, through the way they talk about the workplace (which impacts company reputation), and through their loyalty/retention. They may even suggest the workplace to their network and organically recruit!

Positivity is infectious. If people are supported, they'll have more positive interactions with stakeholders. Better communications results in more sales, more recommendations, better reputation, etc. This is especially important for service industries but also matters in B2B interactions. If you're not enjoyable to work with, people may seriously consider partnering with other companies.

How are you reskilling leaders in your organization to support a “Work Well” culture?

Those in leadership are the representatives of our values and are responsible for setting an example to support a “work well” culture — considering the whole person mentally, socially, emotionally and physically.

Additionally, we require leadership participation in ongoing DEI conversations, both in facilitated professional sessions and in smaller, more casual team experiences. This helps keep belonging/inclusion initiatives top of mind as we strive to create the model of a “serving leader.” *Note: “serving leaders” is a new title we adopted that better exemplifies “being of service” to our employees, as opposed to the traditional “servant leader.”*

Finally, we are deeply considering our values and ensuring we truly have alignment. We



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Ideas take time to implement. What is one small step every individual, team or organization can take to get started on these ideas — to get well?

Empathy is worth millions. Making time to be present and to listen to others is essential to a wellness-enriched culture. While it sounds easy, it takes discipline in the busy lives of our leadership. But showing that we care can have a profound impact on the success of our company.

What are your “Top 5 Trends To Track In the Future of Workplace Wellness?”

1. HYBRID AND REMOTE WORK

We know that many employees say their mental health, work-life balance, and physical activity have improved since making the switch to hybrid work. At KNOCK, our idea of an office space has evolved — we now see it as a *creative* space, where employees are welcome to think, collaborate, or simply escape their at-home setup. Technology only continues to improve and offer advanced ways to connect — if employees feel better at home, we believe our work will be better, too.

2. DEI RESOURCES AND COACHING

Mental health is largely a DEI issue: Workers from historically underrepresented groups, including LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx employees, are more likely to experience wellness issues. In response to both recent events and ongoing systemic disparities, it's essential that leadership teams provide an outlet for conversation, plus resources and expert-lead coaching, for better DEI education and understanding.

3. EMPLOYER BENEFITS

When you give employees a reason to stay — when you care about their personal and professional growth, create moments to connect as a team, and find ways to support them beyond their work hours — you're left with a happy and thriving team. Our employees have full membership to a boutique fitness studio, financial support from an attorney, and



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We have sick days when we're physically unwell — why wouldn't we offer the same for emotional well-being? As mental health continues to be affected by an ever-changing landscape wrought with inflation, systemic disparities, and more, leaders must create opportunities for workers to pause and focus on themselves.

5. LISTEN

While leadership teams may ideate countless ways to improve their workplace, the most effective way to improve any culture is by listening to those who comprise it. Culture can't be forced — it's built naturally and equally by both workplace veterans and entry-level employees. Leaders, ask your direct reports how they're doing; what they need; what programs and initiatives they'd like to see implemented. Each work environment is unique — give space for employees to actively shape yours.

What is your greatest source of optimism about the future of workplace wellness?

However challenging work and life have been and continue to be, we are in an era that is opening our minds. I was a person in a creative field that didn't think we could work remotely due to the collaboration. Now everyone at KNOCK has worked remotely, and there are some things we miss sometimes, but overall, we still meet our goals. We trust our employees and now utilize our office as a creative space. We have and continue to create new boundaries between work and home.

This is the biggest opportunity to improve the standard. Every industry is trying to bring us back to how it was before, but this current moment continues to be an opportunity to reimagine, build off the difficulties of the past couple of years and continue to create better workplace situations for better workplace wellness.

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