

# The Rise Of The New Leader

AURORA



THE CASE FOR PRIORITISING AND  
NURTURING LEADERSHIP 'SOFT SKILLS' IN  
THE MANAGEMENT OF A POST-COVID19  
WORKFORCE

The pandemic has both highlighted and brought new aspects to the fore in mental health issues, particularly in our workplaces. Studies have shown that many employees have experienced difficulties and challenges in their personal wellbeing during the pandemic due to lockdowns, furlough, working from home, home-schooling, financial pressures, loss of family or friends and the myriad of private complications that individuals have had to face. These are inextricably linked to their performance in the workplace. The old 'grin and bear it' attitudes of years gone by are no longer acceptable for the employees of the post-pandemic workplace because the sheer depth of personal malaise in the workforce is something that requires a new understanding and focus.

In this white paper, we review the reports of the current situation and the recommendations that have been made to improve attitudes and access to workplace mental health.

**We argue that a new style of leadership is needed in order for the paradigm shift in our collective mentality towards mental health to occur.**

This new leadership will require skills that have hitherto been underrated - the so-called 'soft skills' of empathy, care, kindness, openness and vulnerability - to create a workplace environment that values employees' wellbeing and ultimately strengthens the workforce.



# Mental Health and Wellbeing

There have been many surveys conducted throughout the pandemic on the impact of Covid19 on mental health. Indeed, there are so many different types of study, in multiple countries, with various contributors, different measurable outcomes, sample sizes and myriad other variables that it is impossible to come up with a definitive figure or percentage of people that are suffering with mental health issues in the workplace. However, the UK government's Office for Health Improvement and Disparities have collated much of this data and have distilled it in their regularly updated COVID-19: mental health and wellbeing surveillance report.<sup>1</sup> The clear picture which has emerged is that, in line with lockdowns, there was a deterioration in mental health between March and May 2020, and a second deterioration between October 2020 and February 2021. Whilst there was an improvement between the two waves, and again since the second, importantly, the recovery is not to pre-pandemic levels.

Whilst the number of studies and statistics concerning mental health might be overwhelming, there is a positive aspect to the sheer volume of data, namely, that mental health and wellbeing are becoming important and valued factors culturally. The fact that the questions are being asked, that employees are being considered holistically rather than as automatons or drones, is a welcome advance in the sometimes impersonal workplace.



Furthermore, the acknowledgement that there is an issue has led to the need to find solutions. In 2017, before the sharp rise in pandemic associated wellbeing issues, Deloitte published a report on mental health in the workplace with recommendations for both employees and employers on how to recognise, support and promote wellbeing in the workplace, with an emphasis on how this approach is in the best interest of the company as a whole.<sup>2</sup> It identifies the need for those changes to come from the employers, the leaders and managers, as they are the ones who can actively prioritise changes in management, destigmatisation and support. It also suggests that wellbeing should be considered as another business metric, one that is monitored and quantifiably measured, in which the company has goals or corporate pledges it can work towards. This idea is also picked up by a report by McKinsey and Company in 2020, in which they say: ‘Things that are measured and receive management attention lead to accountability, and mental health is no different.’<sup>3</sup>

**Their suggestion is that not only do companies need to make ‘behavioural health’ as they have termed it, a transparent priority, but that leaders should be accountable for making progress in those areas.**

This is understandably a big ask of leaders, as it requires not only making changes in workplace attitudes to mental health but also implementing quantifiable measures to track progress.

However, it is because it is a big task that it needs to come from the top – employees on their own cannot make these changes, employers have to. It is paramount therefore that the people in a position to make the necessary changes have the right leadership skills to implement them, as well as the knowledge and support tools to guide them on how.



# Leadership

Leadership is perhaps the first cornerstone we need to understand in attempting to modify our approach to employee wellbeing. The definitive authority on the concept of leadership types is Bernard Bass, whose Handbook of Leadership (Bass and Bass 2009, 4th Ed)<sup>4</sup> is a comprehensive tome on the subject. The research included therein, including Bass's own, collected over 7 decades proves that the academic study of how and why we lead, govern, manage, instruct or even parent is of a wide and diverse interest. Whilst acknowledging that the subject is a vast and varied one, and that for the most part leaders do not have the time or inclination to read a 1296 page book on the matter, for the purposes of this paper we simply need to understand the basics.

In 1939 Lewin et al defined the three types of leadership style as; authoritarian, otherwise known as autocratic; participative (or democratic); and delegative (or laissez-faire). He noted at the time that the most effective in inspiring people to perform well (in his case, students) was the democratic method, in which the participants were slightly less productive than in the autocratic group, but their contributions were of higher quality.<sup>5</sup> The most effective framework for leadership was further defined by James Burns in 1978 as 'transformational' in which leaders 'are those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and, in the process, develop their own leadership capacity.'<sup>6</sup> Bass and Riggio (2006 2nd Edition) build on this definition in their book Transformational Leadership by saying that transformational leaders '...tend to have more committed and satisfied followers. Moreover, transformational leaders empower followers and pay attention to their individual needs and personal development...'<sup>7</sup>

**Transformational leadership would therefore appear to be the gold standard to ensuring employee satisfaction. If transformational leadership can be seen to include the valuing of employee wellbeing as part of the umbrella definition above, then these attributes become even more necessary in the current discussion.**

However, although the principles of good leadership and management have been studied, described and honed for many years, is there any evidence in the real world that they are effectively being used in practise? Surveys such as the one reported on by Deloitte in 2017 <sup>8</sup> show that employee wellbeing is taken into consideration in business decisions 'to a great or moderate extent' in only 44% of organisations. Moreover, employee wellbeing is on senior leaders' agenda 'to a great or moderate extent' in only 43% of cases.

**This would indicate that whilst the most effective methods for good leadership - and therefore a contented workforce - are known, they have yet to become the norm in most businesses.**

Therefore; the question now is how to harness the zeitgeist of interest and concern in employee wellbeing that the pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted. It is not only a moral issue, it is a fundamental duty of care by employers in both health and safety legislation and common law.

**The evidence would point towards challenging and changing some of the more archaic forms of leadership by promoting and creating a transformational leadership model.**

The challenge is in how this new paradigm is created, indeed, how to transform *into* transformational. The answer lies in the type of skills needed for people in management roles, namely so called 'soft skills'.

# Soft Skills

Alison Doyle has recently summarised the definition of soft skills as ‘non-technical skills that relate to how you work’<sup>9</sup> (2020) and proposes a comprehensive list of what these entail, including adaptability, communication, creative thinking, dependability, work ethic, teamwork, positivity, time management, motivation, problem-solving, critical thinking and, conflict resolution. Doyle further describes the details of each of these areas in her follow-up paper<sup>10</sup> (2021) and specified that the soft skills needed in a leadership role ‘include the abilities to resolve problems and conflicts between people’. This skill can be further stretched to include the conflicts employees have within themselves, including the effects of poor mental health.

The Qualtrics study conducted in April 2020<sup>11</sup>, a few short months into the start of the pandemic showed that 42% of respondent employees had already experienced a decline in mental health, indicating that this is a significant issue that leaders need to know how to manage. In 2021, Forbes' Tracey Brower<sup>11</sup> reported on the research that shows that empathy is one of the most important leadership skills needed in the business workplace. Indeed, the same Qualtrics study found that employees reported greater levels of positive mental health when they perceived their leaders as more empathetic.

Creating leaders that can consider the thoughts and feelings of the people they manage, act on those considerations with good communication and kindness, and thereby improve the general workplace environment, is the direction we need to be taking towards transformational leadership. Whilst these skills are for the most part innate, they can also be taught and honed to be most effective in a workplace. The use we put our empathetic or sympathetic feelings to when in the service of a friend or family member will obviously need to be modified in an employer/employee relationship to retain the required professionalism, but there is a sweet spot to be found between a professional and personal dynamic when considering the far-reaching consequences of mental health in a post-pandemic world.

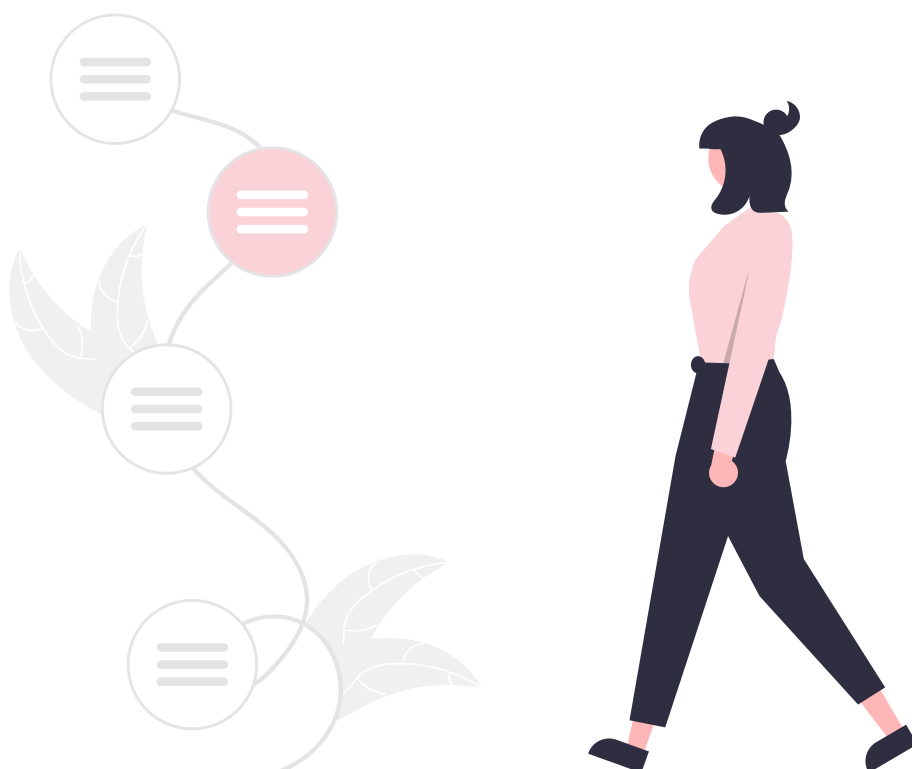
**Future transformational leaders will need to include this practised skill set in their day-to-day management and there is therefore good reason to include its training and teaching as part of their professional development.**

# Wellbeing Tools

As discussed earlier, having the right leadership skills is only one half of the tool set needed to implement wholesale changes in workplace attitudes to tackling mental health. The other half requires the right knowledge with achievable and measurable outcomes. Both the Deloitte (2017) and McKinsey (2020) reports suggest that investment in wellbeing programmes and training in mental health frameworks are important tools in making the necessary changes.

**In order for the leadership to lead, they need the training on how to do so, and the company as a whole benefits from the lessons learned.**

In addition, these programmes can give the accountability and quantifiable progress that can become a business metric, or corporate goal, and therefore justify the return on investment (ROI) for stakeholders.





# Wellbeing and Small Business

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are often at a disadvantage, as many have neither the human nor the financial resources to fully dedicate to employee wellbeing, despite recognising the need for effective strategy and support. In SMEs the responsibility for employee wellbeing often sits within the remit of an already overstretched Human Resources lead who has neither the time nor the necessary level of expertise to devise and implement a comprehensive employee wellbeing strategy that is effective in reducing the impact of mental ill health on critical performance metrics such as absence rates and productivity. In a bid to do something, many adopt a reactive approach by replicating initiatives employed at large firms such as Wellbeing Days and talks which, whilst a positive step forward, are proven in the January 2020 Deloitte report on Mental Health<sup>13</sup> to be less effective and have a lower ROI than more strategic, coaching based interventions. Critically, these initiatives do little to address the soft skills gaps identified in some managers, without which companies cannot foster the psychological safety required for employees to be open and proactive about their mental health needs.

Given the seismic shifts in attitudes towards workplace wellness highlighted earlier, ignoring or minimising the issue of mental health and employee wellbeing is not an option, regardless of company size or turnover.

**It is our recommendation that SMEs seek support in addressing these issues by contracting external expertise wherever necessary. This will help to expedite strategy development and implementation, ensure company fit, ease the workload burden on existing resources and ultimately, improve outcomes for impacted individuals.**

# Conclusion

The pandemic has brought to the fore the importance and scope of mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. Whilst it is tragic that it took a global incident to highlight the impact of emotional and behavioural status on employee productivity, it is also a welcome opening of the conversation. With so many people affected by the mental stresses and strains, and with the number of those hitherto unaffected by any personal experience of mental illness on the rise, it is no longer an issue that can be stigmatised or ignored.

**The paradigm shift in the workplace attitudes to mental health is very much within our reach.**

It requires an acknowledgement within the framework of business that employee wellbeing is an accountable business metric that requires financial input and has measurable outcomes. It also requires a top-down approach, where the employers, leaders and managers create the right environment for discussion and openness about mental health, have the right skills to invite the conversations and concerns their employees have, and the right tools to support and encourage those who need help. Above all, it needs willingness and investment in people.

# References

- 1. Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (November 2021) COVID-19: mental health and wellbeing surveillance report.**  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/2-important-findings-so-far>
- 2. The Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions (March 2017) At a tipping point? Workplace mental health and wellbeing.**  
<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/public-sector/deloitte-uk-workplace-mental-health-n-wellbeing.pdf>
- 3. McKinsey and Company (December 2020) Mental health in the workplace: The coming revolution.**  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/mental-health-in-the-workplace-the-coming-revolution>
- 4. Bass, Bernard M and Bass, Ruth (2009 4th Ed.) The Bass Handbook of Leadership**  
[https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The\\_Bass\\_Handbook\\_of\\_Leadership/dMMEnn-OJQMC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Bass_Handbook_of_Leadership/dMMEnn-OJQMC?hl=en&gbpv=0)
- 5. Lewin, K, Lippitt, R and White, R.K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. Journal of Social Psychology 10: 271–301.**
- 6. Burns, J. M (1978) Leadership New York: Harper and Row**
- 7. Bass, Bernard M and Riggio, Ronald E (2006 2nd Ed.) Transformational Leadership**  
[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=2WsJSw6wa6cC&dq=bass+and+riggio+transformational+leadership&lr=&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=2WsJSw6wa6cC&dq=bass+and+riggio+transformational+leadership&lr=&source=gbs_navlinks_s)
- 8. The Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions (March 2017) At a tipping point? Workplace mental health and wellbeing.**  
<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/public-sector/deloitte-uk-workplace-mental-health-n-wellbeing.pdf>
- 9. Doyle, Alison (September 2020) What Are Soft Skills?**  
<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/what-are-soft-skills-2060852>
- 10. Doyle, Alison (July 2021) Top Soft Skills Employers Value With Examples**  
<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/list-of-soft-skills-2063770>
- 11. Qualtrics (April 2020) The other COVID-19 crisis: Mental health**  
<https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>
- 12. Brower, Tracey (September 2021) Empathy Is The Most Important Leadership Skill According To Research**  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/09/19/empathy-is-the-most-important-leadership-skill-according-to-research/?sh=6759ca63dc5b>
- 13. The Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions (January 2020) Mental health and employers: refreshing the case for investment**  
<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/consulting/articles/mental-health-and-employers-refreshing-the-case-for-investment.html>

# About Aurora Wellness

## AURORA

Established in 2017, Aurora Wellness is a mental health and wellbeing consultancy that delivers a range of personal development coaching programmes designed to strengthen your employees' mental resilience and improve workplace productivity. The company is run by employee wellbeing consultant Ngozi Weller and her cousin, psychologist and mental health coach Obehi Alofoje. With a combined experience of over 25 years in business management and helping people overcome mental health challenges, they are uniquely placed to both understand and meet your employees' wellbeing needs.



Forward thinking, conscious companies are changing the way they think about workplace wellbeing. They're beginning to shift away from reactive management of sickness absence and reduced productivity to proactive approaches to prevention through promoting wellbeing at work. And it all starts with communication.

This is where Aurora Wellness excels. We communicate clearly and concisely exactly how individuals can take responsibility for their own mental health and wellbeing, within the context of modern life. We have adapted the excellent evidence-based research conducted by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) government-backed 'Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing' to develop a pragmatic approach to wellbeing. Making good mental health and wellbeing an integral part of your corporate culture and encouraging your employees to engage with healthy wellbeing strategies is what we do best.

**Our suite of online and face to face A.N.G.E.L of Wellbeing® programmes enable your managers to:**



Have honest conversations about mental health in the workplace

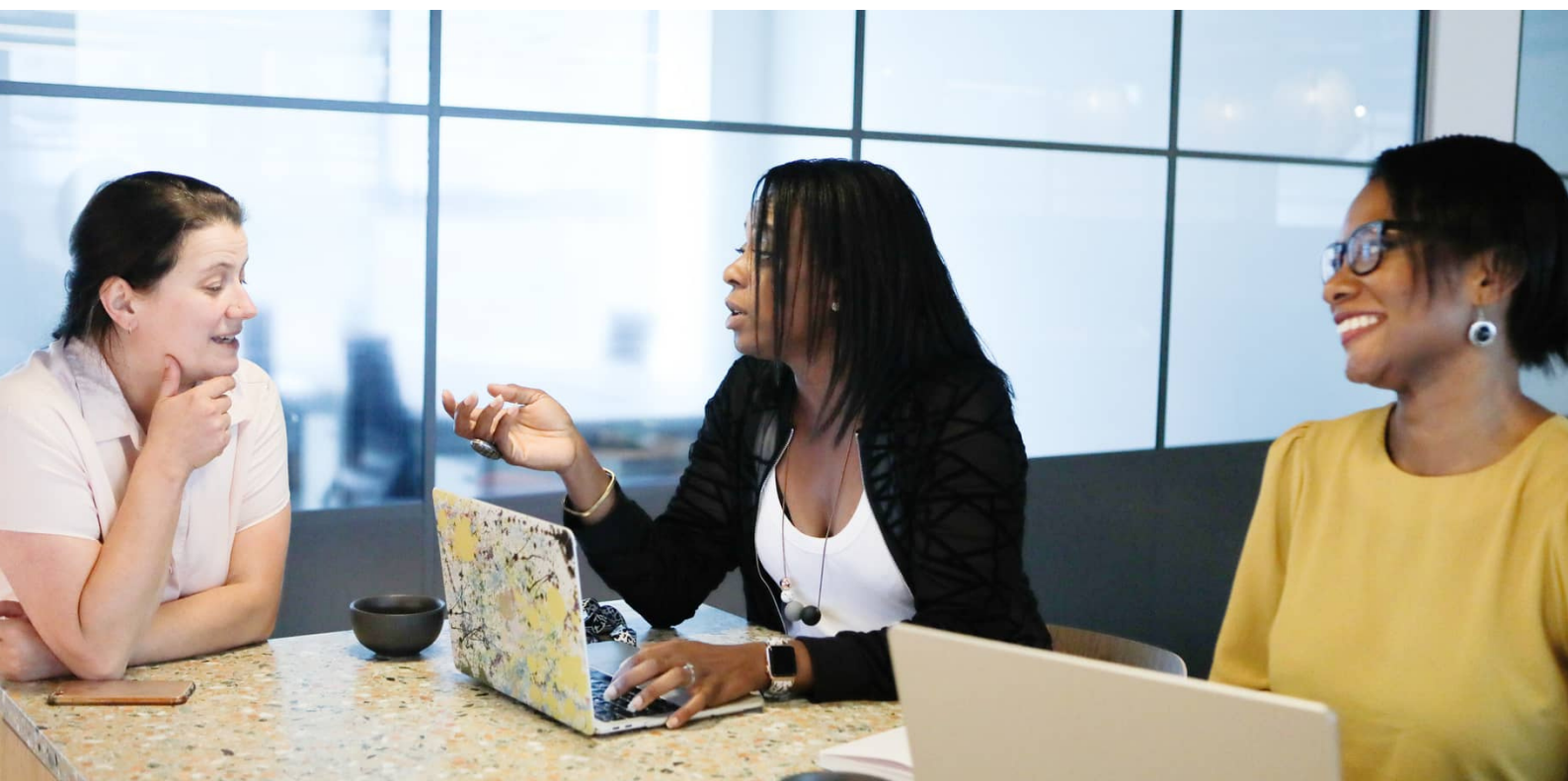


Identify the signs of mental ill health to watch out for in themselves and others



Develop preventative and reparative strategies to reverse the impact of work-related stress

We work with growing technology, manufacturing and engineering SMEs who are motivated to improve their employee experience. We partner with businesses that understand the value of good mental health in the workplace, and who are looking for experienced support to develop and incorporate workplace wellbeing strategies that work for them. Our pragmatic approach to wellbeing is both effective and impactful. We have successfully delivered our A.N.G.E.L. of Wellbeing® programmes to many companies across a variety of sectors, countries and territories. Previous clients include Britishvolt, Cochlear, Devoteam, Energus, Frauscher, FSL Aerospace, Juice Analytics, Matillion, N3twork, No Brainer and One File.



# Our Services, Talks and Programmes

## If you cannot talk about it, then you cannot manage it.





Awareness is the first step in the fight to end the stigma surrounding mental ill health. Organisations seeking a proactive approach to ending mental health stigma in the workplace can hire us to deliver our popular and engaging productivity or wellbeing talks for their staff. We speak from experience on a variety of topics including:

- Managing Mental Wellbeing
- Building Resilience
- Productivity Blocks
- Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

## Building a resilient workforce for a challenging future.

For some, awareness alone is not enough. Ambitious organisations driven to significantly increase workplace productivity without compromising on the health or wellbeing of their staff, invest in our A.N.G.E.L. of Wellbeing® programmes for managers. Incorporating the UK government backed 5 Ways to Wellbeing, our programmes equip your managers to tackle the growing workplace wellbeing challenge. Through a combination of online or classroom based interactive workshops and tailored group or one to one coaching, we will up-skill your managers with the practical tools and strategies required to confidently handle sensitive conversations around mental health and to propel your business into the future by building a resilient workforce.

## Aurora wellness is here to help you.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
|  Develop a mental wellbeing strategy that works for your company and your staff.               |  Empower your managers to confidently identify and support employees with wellbeing concerns. |
|  Raise awareness and understanding of what good mental health is and how it can be maintained. |  Provide professional and personalised support for individuals who are struggling.            |



# Get in touch for *support*

Book a complimentary consultation to find out how we can support you and your organisation to ensure employee wellbeing is truly at the core of your people strategy:

[www.aurorawellnessgroup.co.uk/contact-us](http://www.aurorawellnessgroup.co.uk/contact-us)

Learn more about Aurora Wellness here:

[www.aurorawellnessgroup.co.uk](http://www.aurorawellnessgroup.co.uk)

[WWW.AURORAWELLNESSGROUP.CO.UK](http://WWW.AURORAWELLNESSGROUP.CO.UK)

Copyrights Aurora Incorporated t/a Aurora Wellness  
All rights reserved.



# About the Authors



**Obehi Alofoje**

Obehi Alofoje is a psychologist, stress management consultant, and productivity coach who supports HR leaders to implement effective and impactful mental wellbeing & productivity strategies in the workplace. She also coaches people to manage stressful situations, and to overcome traumatic experiences, affecting their mental health.

Obehi delivers simple but effective mental wellbeing and productivity strategies designed to help senior leaders and their teams thrive at work, thereby preventing the rise of professional burnout and a rapid decline of good mental health in a post-pandemic era. She has been featured on NBC New York Live and is a contributor for the online publication Psychology Today.



**Ngozi Weller**

Ngozi Weller is an employee mental health and wellbeing consultant who works with small and medium sized businesses to deliver sustainable and effective employee wellbeing and productivity solutions. Calling on her unique experience and expertise, she helps leaders skilfully navigate the challenge of balancing workplace productivity with employee wellbeing in a competitive post-COVID era.

Having worked for over 15 years in the world of Big Oil, Ngozi has experienced first-hand how challenging the corporate world can be. Following her own battle with work-related depression and anxiety, she set up Aurora with her psychologist cousin to normalise the conversation around workplace mental health and to provide strategic wellbeing support designed to strengthen your employees' mental resilience and improve workplace productivity.



AURORA