

'Staying healthy together': An interview with Tom Hayes

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The chief executive of Corporate Banking at Bank of Ireland Tom Hayes tells Thinkbusiness.ie editor John Kennedy about the thought process behind the Staying Healthy Together programme and the crucial role it is playing in helping colleagues navigate the Covid-19 crisis.

Looking after colleagues' physical, mental and financial wellbeing – key takeaways:

- Focusing on employee wellness has never been so important given the extraordinarily traumatic times we are all going through
- From a leadership team perspective, we recognised early on that it was vital that we remember to ground every decision we make by asking ourselves what it means for all our stakeholders
- Using digital technology to engage with your colleagues during such a traumatic time is critically important
- Staying Healthy Together has helped to create a sense of togetherness amongst colleagues that hopefully will be beneficial for them and the organisation
- We are living our 'One Group, One Team' values better today than we have at any stage in the bank's history
- Staying Healthy Together was grounded very much in our purpose: to enable customers, colleagues and communities to thrive
- I believe that how banks and organisations generally act through this crisis will define the relationship with their employees and customers for the future

"I think how we respond to the needs of our colleagues and our customers during the current crisis will define those relationships going forward," said Tom Hayes, CEO of Corporate Banking at Bank of Ireland, as we discuss how an organisation of more than 10,000 people, including many on the frontline in branches, many juggling working from home with responsibilities as carers and parents, has so far adapted to the so-called "new normal."

Hayes was one of the driving forces behind Staying Healthy Together, a 10-week programme led by fitness and wellbeing expert Karl Henry aimed at supporting colleagues' mental, physical and financial wellbeing. The programme includes everything from fitness tips and live Q&As to weekly challenges, dance work-outs and much more and is also supported by the Bank's Sporting Ambassador Shane Lowry.

At the time of writing close to 4,000 employees of the bank have logged in to the Wellbeing mobile and desktop app and the initiative chimes in with various other initiatives such as Recognising Success to acknowledge the contribution of colleagues who have gone "above and beyond" to support customers and co-workers.

Staying Healthy Together was one step in a myriad of efforts to support customers, colleagues and communities throughout the Covid-19 crisis. The bank

moved with speed to assist personal and business customers, offering a range of supports including mortgage and loan repayment breaks, helping elderly customers cocooning, offering dedicated support for healthcare workers, streamlining services and fast-tracking payments to suppliers. The response has included donating €1m in emergency funds to the Community Foundation for Ireland to help support the most vulnerable across the island of Ireland.

"My overall feeling when I look at how the bank and staff have generally responded to the crisis is one of immense pride," said Hayes "From two perspectives. Firstly, how the bank has responded to customers particularly in terms of supporting the most vulnerable at this time.

"And then secondly if you layer on top of that the way that staff have responded – it has been right across the board from branches to contact and support centres, and staff working from home who are providing all of the essential services against the backdrop of extraordinarily challenging times – it has been really outstanding and has made me really proud of the organisation that I work for."

Enabling customers, colleagues and communities to thrive



Hayes said that the Wellbeing programme is a small but essential element in helping the organisation to keep people connected and support their wellbeing. "I think how banks and organisations generally act through this crisis in terms of how they relate to their own employees and customers will define the relationship with those employees and customers for the future.

"From a leadership team perspective, we recognised early-on that it was vital that we remember to ground every decision we make by asking ourselves what that means for each of our stakeholders, our customers, our colleagues and our communities!

"We felt that every employee across the organisation is going to be impacted by the crisis in different ways. Some will miss the office or the commute, some will not. Some will find it easier than others to work from home. There are colleagues who are on the frontline who feel nervous about going into branches or using public transport. But overall there is the sense that everybody has embraced it completely and willingly."

Hayes said the alacrity with which the bank's workforce embraced the "new normal" as Ireland drifted into a lockdown that became even more vigorous as the country stepped up to flatten the curve spoke to Bank of Ireland's culture and values.

"We talk about 'one group, one team' being one of our core values and I think it is fair to say that we are living that value better today than we have at any stage in the bank's history."

An emphasis on employee wellbeing during 2019 resulting in a new app being introduced in February 2020, just ahead of the Covid-19 crisis, was pure serendipity.

"First and foremost, it was grounded very much in our purpose: to enable customers, colleagues and communities to thrive. That was the message that our CEO Francesca McDonagh had been articulating from the start. A huge amount of work went into reinvigorating employee wellbeing in 2019, resulting in an app that was designed to help colleagues to thrive under three key headings: mental, physical and financial wellbeing.

"Clearly the huge amount of work undertaken by our Culture and Internal Communications teams to develop the app was done without realising that Covid-19 was just down the tracks. But if we hadn't developed that app we wouldn't have the functional capability that we have today and we'd probably be struggling to engage with colleagues the way we are at the moment.

"But in essence, at the heart of this was a recognition that if we are to thrive as an organisation then we have to have colleague wellbeing as one of the key principles that are at the centre of everything we do.

"When the crisis came, and it became clear that we were going to deal with a whole host of different challenges and our colleagues were going to be faced with a variety of different personal challenges – being on the frontline, working from home, caring for children or elderly relatives – then the importance of the programme grew exponentially."

Hayes explained that choosing fitness guru Karl Henry – one of the key faces of RTE's Operation Transformation – was about making the programme something that was personal, meaningful and bespoke for colleagues.

"As well as being an exceptionally talented trainer, Karl brings a huge amount of energy and drive to everything that he does and represents a positive, encouraging face for our wellbeing programme at a time when colleagues really need support.

"I sat down with Karl and the Culture and Internal Comms team, including Claire Murray, Barbara Nestor and Kelly Spratt, and between us we came up with the concept of Staying Healthy Together. It dovetailed really well with the capabilities we have on the app and our ambition to support all aspects of colleague wellbeing.

"Spectrum did a fantastic job working closely with Karl and his team in building the content to meet the needs of colleagues. No two colleagues have exactly the same needs and requirements and for many people who are working remotely it is quite hard when you are not interacting with colleagues in the same way as you would in the office. The Staying Healthy Together programme adds a variety of rich content that people can dip in and out of."

Hayes explained that the decision to involve golfer Shane Lowry was based on his standing as one of our most popular sportsmen, who would resonate with the bank's employees across the organisation both at home and abroad. "Shane has been a great addition to the programme and has enthusiastically embraced the weekly challenges."

"Focusing on employee wellness has never been so important given the extraordinarily traumatic times we are going through. You must focus on all aspects – it has to be about mental, physical and financial wellbeing.

"As well as demonstrating the important role that digital technology plays at critically important times, I do believe that Staying Healthy Together has helped to create a sense of togetherness amongst colleagues that hopefully will be beneficial for them and the organisation both now and for the future," Hayes concluded.

*Written by John Kennedy
(john.kennedy3@boi.com)*