

Workplace Wellness Programs-Components for Success

The health of a person essentially comes down to two things – genetics and behavior. We are all born with a set of pre-dispositions to disease that we can't change, but we can have an impact on our behavior. Most diseases come down to various health related behaviors such as exercise, diet, and smoking, and these are what most wellness programs attempt to target.

Programs that create the right environment for new health behaviors and provide support for those behaviors are the most successful. Without the right conditions and support, a workplace wellness program cannot work and will not be sustainable. Understanding the fundamentals of behavioral science and leveraging that knowledge is the foundation for creating and sustaining a workplace wellness program that can have a huge impact on the health of your workforce. As healthcare costs continue to rise, many companies are turning to workplace wellness programs as an option for decreasing premiums and creating a healthier workforce. Research has shown that effective workplace wellness programs can reduce employee sick days by 25% and reduce healthcare costs

Merely having a wellness program is not enough to make your workforce healthier. This article will discuss the key components that research in healthcare and behavioral science say are necessary to create a sustainable and successful workplace wellness program.

Understanding the Current Environment

Any successful workplace wellness initiative must start with having a good understanding of the current work environment and the health challenges and goals in that environment. Our approach is to start with a workplace health and wellness assessment. A good wellness assessment gathers information on the following topics through documents, data, surveys, observations, and interviews:

- Current workplace health and wellness policies
- Current workplace health and wellness programs and participation
- Insurance records
- Worker's comp claims
- Attendance records
- Workplace environmental factors
- Community environmental factors

Once this data is gathered and evaluated, a more comprehensive approach for addressing workplace wellness issues can be determined.

Getting Buy In

Buy-in starts at top leadership because having their support means having more resources available for programs. In addition, top leadership can demonstrate a commitment to wellness that can influence people throughout the entire organization. The first step in getting top leadership support is to describe the potential benefits to the organization. A lot of data exists demonstrating that wellness programs with high engagement produce a good return on investment. Return on investment data can include reduced healthcare cost, less absenteeism, improved productivity, improved morale, and lower turnover. Presenting this data along with

data demonstrating opportunities for improvement within your organization can strengthen interest from top leaders. It is important to create a wellness program that is a long-term plan rather than a short-term initiative to see the full benefit.

After leaders are bought into the idea, it is time to garner support from the rest of the organization. The likelihood of getting employees engaged in a wellness initiative that is pushed down from top leadership is much lower than the likelihood of an initiative started and managed by employees. Although leadership support is important, employee input and engagement is also important. Buy-in can be created by involving employees in decisions about policies and programs and getting employees to participate in programs. For example, rather than identifying the goals for people you can ask employees what their health goals are (e.g., smoking reduction, weight loss, improved diet, better sleep habits, more exercise etc.) and then give them options to choose from which might help to address some of these goals.

Success Factors

Health and wellness programs that are most likely to work have several commonalities that will be discussed below.

1. Consequence-based Rather than Awareness-based

Most initiatives in health and just about any other area of the workplace rely on building awareness to motivate behavior. Although awareness is often a useful initial step, awareness building in itself may not always be the most effective way to encourage behavior change and the development of new habits. The science suggests that behavior is driven by events that precede the behavior (antecedents) and events that follow behavior (consequences). Antecedents include things such as awareness, signs, slogans, memos, meetings, email reminders, scare tactics, and even data on disease prevalence (i.e., smokers are more likely to die of heart disease).

Consequences include things we call extrinsic consequences such as movie tickets, a dinner for two, or a lottery to win prizes. They also include things we call intrinsic or natural consequences such as feeling better, having more energy, losing weight, or a doctor's report of lower cholesterol. When our behavior is followed by positive consequences we are motivated to continue behaving in a similar manner. When our behavior is followed by negative consequences, we are motivated to stop behaving in this way.

It is important to note that the recipient of the consequences determines whether consequences received are considered 'positive' or 'negative'. We say that consequences are defined from the performer's perspective and by their impact on the performer's behavior. We know that consequences are about 80% effective in motivating behavior and awareness or other antecedents are only typically 20% effective in motivating behavior. Most people are aware that drinking too much, eating fatty foods (like samosas), smoking or sitting for too long are each bad for your health. However, many of us continue to engage in these behaviors because the consequences are very sure to occur soon after the unhealthy behaviors. These immediate and high probability consequences serve to motivate us to continue with unhealthy behavior even though we may understand that they have a detrimental effect on our health over a longer period of time.

It is because of the massive impact of consequences on behavior that we suggest that you consider the experience of the end user when designing wellness programs. It is important

to think about the consequences of getting fitter, but it's even more important to consider the consequences of contacting and ultimately using the programs themselves. You may not be able to control long term intrinsic positive consequences (such as fitness), but you can program in short term ones that get the desired behavior started. For example, removing barriers to participation and making it easy to understand and use the wellness program can cause people to try it out. Once they try it out, making sure that they experience some positive consequences right away will increase the chances of continuing to use the program. Almost 90% of companies offer some sort of financial rewards or prizes for employee wellness. These include cash prizes or gift cards for learning about healthy behaviors, engaging in healthy behaviors (i.e., exercising), and/or demonstrating health improvements (i.e., actually losing weight). However, not all of these options work equally well and some may be more sustainable than others. For example, reducing premiums, paying cash bonuses, giving gift cards for compliance, or applying penalties for noncompliance probably each have their own potential pros and cons.

2. Designed with the End User in Mind

Although it is a good idea to survey employees about their preferences for wellness programs, it is also important to look at the participation data and make changes to the programs based on the data. For example, employees might report enthusiasm for a marathon training group but they might be much more likely to do something that requires less effort, like wearing a pedometer. They might be enthusiastic about the idea of an onsite gym but if they already work ten-hour days, they may end up deciding to go home at the end of the day instead of hitting the treadmill for 30 minutes. Participation data will allow you to try different programs and variations of programs out to identify those with high engagement. There are other considerations when it comes to the end user. For example, it is valuable to know the aspects of health that employees care about and why. People are more likely to participate in health programs that fit their personal goals like quitting smoking or losing weight.

It is also important to understand barriers to being healthy. For example, if time pressure causes people to work through their lunch breaks, they might be making less healthy choices and they miss the opportunity to take a few steps. Lastly, the amount of effort required in terms of time and resources is an important consideration along with the level of enjoyment. A program that is high on effort and low on enjoyment will not be useful.

3. Uses Data to Evaluate and Iterate

We know that people tend to respond differently to the same consequence and their response depends on factors too numerous to control in creating and deploying effective programs. Some of the things you try will work. Some will not. Some will produce sustainable gains, and some will produce short-term effects. Knowing behavioral science can help you to better predict which things will work and which will not however, there is no way of knowing in advance exactly what will work and what will not. This all goes to say that it is of paramount importance to regularly test, experiment with new things, and rapidly discard ineffective components of your programs. Once you've got the means to gather regular data about the program's success, this data can be used to improve your efforts over time. The data can also be used to tell short personal success stories resulting from the program and this practice can get others talking about the program and help you to gain more participants. You can and should also use success data to celebrate successes among participants in ways that they enjoy and appreciate. Celebrations can be simple and

low cost, and they should be regular (i.e., monthly or more frequent). Program evaluation with data should be lean and fit for purpose. It does not have to be an arduous task. The primary purpose of evaluation is so that you can improve the program and celebrate wins as they occur.

If you are unsure about what kinds of data you could collect to evaluate your wellness programs, the following sources of data might be helpful:

- Absenteeism
- Biometric screenings
- Behavioral and self-observation data
- Culture and opinion surveys
- One-to-one or small group conversations or focus groups
- Program participation
- Employee interest surveys
- Medical claims

Conclusion

Effective health and wellness programs start with understanding the current environment using data from a variety of sources. Buy-in should be established at all levels of the organization which will help with obtaining resources, selecting the right programs, and getting employee engagement and participation. Programs should not only focus on awareness but should instead use consequences to encourage health behaviors and the success of the program. Consequences can include use of both extrinsic and natural consequences. Users' needs, barriers, and interests should be used in selecting and modifying programs. Finally, data should be regularly evaluated in an effort to continuously improve the programs. Employee health and wellness programs with high engagement deliver large returns on investment and very likely will provide many additional benefits to an organization and its people for a long time to come.

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