

Does your workplace wellness program need a boost? This article will tell how to improve outcomes for health management efforts by focusing on the big picture and creating a culture of health in the workplace. Learn about industry best practices to adopt, and see how one large employer has put this philosophy to work for its employees.

Unlock the Power of Corporate Wellness Programs

by David Anderson

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Today's business climate is anything but forgiving. Mounting expenses and a rapidly changing and increasingly global economy are forcing executives and business owners to find ways to cut costs and increase productivity. One area increasingly seen as a source of potential cost savings and improved productivity is employee benefits.

While most employers want to offer a comprehensive benefits package to protect the health of their employees, they also struggle with the costs associated with such programs. That's why a growing number of business leaders are turn-

ing to population health management as a way to prevent costly episodes of illness and disability before they occur.

Population health management programs are often referred to as *wellness programs*. These programs have been around for more than 30 years, but they are now evolving into an essential tool for employers and the broader health care community because of their ability to change the employee health behaviors that drive future health care costs. Health management programs also offer a unique value because they reduce costs by improving employee health, rather

than cutting costs by eliminating or reducing benefits.

To be most effective, wellness programs must become fully ingrained in the culture of an organization. Rather than looking at health management as a standalone effort, such as a campaign to increase awareness of the connection between diabetes and diet, experts recommend that employers also focus on the overall tone of its corporate culture. Does it contribute to the health of their employees and send a strong message that employee health is important, or does the culture create barriers to employee health and well-being?

Why Culture Matters

Long-term and large-scale changes in the health of a company require a look at the big picture. Ask management tough questions such as:

- Is the company making it easy for employees to make healthy choices?
- Is it supporting healthy choices?
- Does it offer programs and tools that help employees adopt healthy lifestyles and encourage the use of these programs?
- Does management lead by example, or do they follow the “do as I say, not as I do” mantra?
- Is health integrated into business strategy and management practices in meaningful ways?
- Is the company giving employees good enough reasons, or incentives, to make lasting changes?

It's true that standalone wellness programs can reap short-term success, but to fully realize the benefits of this approach, organizations need to create a culture of health. *Creating a culture of health* means creating a work environment that fosters healthy lifestyles and decision making. In a culture of health, employees not only feel supported in changing unhealthy behaviors, they also feel more motivated and accountable to maintain those changes and to build on past successes.

People generally adopt the norms in their culture rather than battling against them. If a company makes healthy behaviors difficult (such as having poorly marked stairwells) or less accepted (such as discouraging stretch breaks), there will be fewer of them. It's really as simple as that. If management encourages healthy behaviors, employees will be more committed to change and that success will build on itself.

Consider the case of Chrysler. The company recognized the importance of healthy employees and worked with its partner, the International United Auto Workers Union (UAW), to implement a worksite wellness program.

Since its inception, the goal of the program has been to provide a cost-effective worksite health promotion program that helps increase productivity; contain health care costs; and decrease sickness, absenteeism and premature death. Because the company has maintained a holistic approach to health management that

touches all aspects of an employee's work experience, the program has grown and evolved steadily over time. It has earned widespread recognition in the health care industry and is responsible for some impressive bottom-line results and improved health outcomes, including consistent increases in program participation, and decreases in employee risk factors.

Culture and Bottom Line

When considering that the average American spends about 2,000 hours a year at work—nearly half of his or her waking hours—it's easy to see how the work environment can profoundly influence individual health behaviors and risk factors. Fortunately, building a healthy worksite culture need not cost much money. What it does require is organizational vision and commitment. Engaging upper-level management to practice *and* to preach, creating a healthier work environment, and developing supportive policies and benefits can all improve a company's culture and its bottom line.

Creating and maintaining a healthy workplace culture can accomplish a number of goals for an employer. For starters, by showing real rather than token support for healthy choices, employers and management can greatly increase employee participation in wellness programs. Increased engagement leads to greater potential for lasting health behavior change, as well as encouraging even more employees to get involved. Employees who make positive changes in their lifestyles are likely to be healthier, more productive and happier. That typically leads to reduced health risks for an employer and, in turn, lower health care claims costs.

Many employers are also finding that an added benefit to this approach is less absenteeism and “presenteeism,” fewer performance deficits on the job, along with higher employee morale, and a boost to recruiting and retention efforts.

For confirmation of how important workplace culture is, one can also look at the growth of industry awards and initiatives that concentrate on fostering a healthy workplace culture. Several well-respected industry organizations now have award initiatives that recognize the successful use of

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health management practices in the corporate environment. These include the:

- C. Everett Koop National Health Award from The Health Project
- Well Workplace Award from WELCOA
- Corporate Health Achievement Award from the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine
- Corporate Health & Productivity Management Award from the Institute for Health & Productivity Management
- Best Employers for Health Lifestyles Award from the National Business Group on Health.

In addition, other organizations such as the National Committee for Quality Assurance, the Centers for Disease Control and the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) have launched initiatives to promote the identification and use of best practices in corporate wellness programs.

Best Practices

The first step to getting a company on track for creating a culture of health is to understand the current best practices.

Most health management programs employ the following best practices.¹

1. **Encourage strong senior management support.** This is the key that opens the door to creating a culture of health. Having committed, visionary leadership that communicates and demonstrates commitment to good health will effectively drive this same sentiment down through the organization. Leaders will increasingly become role models by walking the talk through everyday lifestyle behaviors and participation in the wellness program.
2. **Implement a comprehensive program design.** Look at the big picture versus individual programs that target standalone problems. By creating a comprehensive population health management strategy, management can affect individual awareness of programs and benefits of behavior change. They can also change the workplace culture by getting many employees involved in

group activities. A comprehensive design also addresses the needs of the entire employee population and provides continuity over time.

3. **Consider an incentive strategy.** Incentives are not a long-term substitute for creating a healthy culture, but they can help jump-start participation in the program. By integrating incentives into the benefit plan, managers can weave population health strategy into the very fabric of the organization. This sends a clear message that the organization believes in the value of health management and views the employee as an important and accountable partner in achieving a healthier, more productive future. There are many ways to offer incentives, but research shows incentives that are incorporated into health benefits programs (such as reduced premiums or contribution to a health spending account) are probably the most cost-effective. While they can be an important tool, however, it is also critical to

pulled in every direction?

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- use incentives appropriately or they will become an expense that contributes little to long-term success.
4. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Develop a communication strategy that educates and establishes ongoing awareness and support for health management programs. Communications can address the company culture by including themes on the company's commitment to population health management; providing a forum for senior leaders to demonstrate involvement; addressing concerns about confidentiality, especially as a program is launched; and giving visibility to successful employee participation through testimonials, employee events and related tactics.
 5. **Make use of dedicated on-site staff.** Talk to the health management partner about the feasibility of incorporating on-site staff into the program. These individuals become the "face" of the wellness program and the company's commitment to health. They also serve a very strategic function by working with local management to establish health promotion policies, such as five-minute stretch breaks and flexible work schedules, along with worksite environment changes like signage encouraging people to use the stairs, healthy vending options, healthy lunchroom options, and walking paths in and outside the building. On-site health professionals also encourage employees to get involved in making healthy behavior changes and help support them throughout the long-term change process.
 6. **Give employees choices by offering multiple delivery methods (phone, mail, online).** Giving employees a variety of convenient ways to participate in health management programs changes the workplace culture by providing ubiquitous visibility and ready access to all program activities, regardless of whether employees are at a large headquarters, manufacturing site, small field office or even a home-based office. Because employees vary in their needs and preferences for interaction and learning, offering a greater variety of delivery methods can increase participation and improve outcomes.
 7. **Employ population-based awareness building activities.** Surround employees with options and recurring messages that keep the program and benefits of behavior change top of mind. This will reinforce the value of good health and encourage employees to get involved in the program whenever health becomes an immediate priority for them.
 8. **Offer biometric health screenings.** Health fairs or screenings can be highly visible activities that reinforce the message that the company places a high value on health, while also engaging the entire workforce in a fun and informative assessment process. Integrate these health screenings with a health assessment and follow-up coaching, and strengthen the intervention and referral process while spreading the message of prevention and good health.
 9. **Integrate the efforts of the health benefit partners.** Work with health benefit partners, from a health management partner to a disability and disease management partner, to align program objectives, program communications and cross-referrals. This provides a network of support that engages employees wherever they are on the continuum of health. It assures they are aware of and can appropriately access all the components of a health improvement strategy. Because no single vendor offers "best-of-class" solutions across the entire health continuum, maximizing an employer's outcomes and return on investment is likely to come from integrating the resources of multiple vendors and promoting the program using a single "brand" and umbrella communication strategy.
- Lead by Example**
- A growing number of leading companies have successfully created healthy work environments and improved their business outcomes in the process. Use the Chrysler example. The Chrysler/UAW program, which has been in place for more than 20 years, incorporates many of the best practices outlined above.
- First, management clearly supports the program and demonstrates its belief in the importance of a healthy workplace. New hires at Chrysler are encouraged to participate in the company's wellness program. The company also offers ongoing educational opportunities to help employees learn how to reduce and manage health risks, while encouraging physical activity through on-site walking groups and recreational activities, such as basketball, volleyball and softball. The wellness staff also recognizes employees who have made positive changes in their health with healthy achiever awards, and engages employees in the program by appointing wellness delegates.
 - The Chrysler/UAW program is a holistic program that includes annual health assessments and biometric screenings, coupled with group and individualized interventions like one-on-one health coaching (available via telephone and mail), and group workshops targeting topics such as smoking cessation, stress management, nutrition and hypertension.
 - Employees are given a choice of incentives to encourage participation in both the health assessment and ongoing program offerings, like coaching programs and workshops.
 - Education and communication are consistent throughout the Chrysler/UAW program. The company maintains a lending library where employees can check out information about healthy living. In addition, employees receive a newsletter about the wellness program and upcoming activities, along with targeted brochures and reminders. Information can also be found on the company's employee Web site and throughout the workplace at information stations and "stop-by" tables.
 - Chrysler maintains a physical presence for the wellness program by ensuring that each of its facilities with more than 500 employees has an on-site wellness program coordinator who supports a healthy culture and engages employees in one-on-one "health chats" and other program activities.
 - In addition, the wellness program team makes direct referrals to on-site

disease management programs like Chrysler's DRIVING DCX (Diabetes Care Experts) and Blood Pressure Success Zone (BPSZ) for employees who have chronic conditions.

"At Chrysler, Healthy People Drive Our Future is not just our motto, it's a fact. We understand the vital role communication and education play in developing knowledgeable health care consumers among our employees," said Neil Levins, Healthy People Initiatives manager at Chrysler.

As a result of these efforts, Chrysler has reaped some very impressive results, including:

- 52% annual health assessment participation (which has increased steadily each year)
- 75% of employees have completed a health assessment in the last three years.
- 51% participate in biometric screening.
- 78% of employees have completed a screening in the last three years.

Of the employees who have completed a health assessment:

- 64% are within their ideal weight range.
- 58% exercise regularly.

- Tobacco use has decreased by nearly 5% since 2000.
- The percentage of employees with six or more health risks has decreased from 12% to 10%.

The Final Score

By following these best practices, employers can improve employee participation in a wellness program and reduce employee health risks over time. Health risks have been proved to be directly tied to higher employer health care expendi-

tures and productivity-related costs. By reducing health risks, employers can lower these bottom-line costs as well. **B&C**

Endnote

1. P.E. Terry, E.L.D. Seaverson, J. Grossmeier, D.R. Anderson. "Association Between Nine Quality Components and Superior Worksite Health Management Program Results." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* (forthcoming).

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