A Healthy Workplace Culture: Its Purpose, Strategy, and Impact

Health and Culture White Paper

simplywell

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ABSTRACT

Workplace wellness programs are often deployed to help make a positive impact on employee health and productivity, but this impact is best realized if employers and wellness providers are successful at creating a culture of health. Since a culture of health is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution and may differ from workplace to workplace, it's important to work with a seasoned provider who can ensure that ample consideration is given and recommendations are provided regarding the key items that can impact culture, from choosing the right incentives to utilizing communication to including disease management and coaching. This paper discusses the purpose, deciding factors, and benefits to developing a culture of health within an organization.

CONTENT

To achieve a healthy workplace culture, it is important to first understand the employees and their needs, desires, and interests. Implementing a workplace wellness program without this information is counterproductive and may result in the implementation of an award-winning program better suited for a different organization. Decisions may be made before defining expectations and how success will be measured. For example, a successful workplace wellness program can mean more than realizing a financial return on investment (ROI). A positive value of investment (VOI), while less often cited as the deciding factor to implement a wellness program, is an important result to consider. Sometimes, the VOI is more important than ROI, especially when it comes to achieving an engaged workforce. By establishing the goal of cultivating a healthy workplace culture and then taking action to ensure its creation, a company has the best opportunity to realize the advantages of a wellness program initiative.

OVERVIEW

"A culture of health and wellness is defined by its outcomes."

Fabius and Clarke, xxviii

Within the last decade, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the rapidly evolving wellness industry have shifted the focus of companies from simply raising health awareness to managing the health of an organization's entire population. Yet, more than meeting federal standards and cutting healthcare costs are at stake in a culture of health. Creating and sustaining an engaging culture of health is now the vision for employers whose goal is total population health management.

The effects of creating a culture of health and improving the health of a workforce ripple across the business of an organization and its people, and have been shown to contribute to increased productivity among employees. A 2011 study compared a population's health risk factors to their productivity and found a significant relationship between absenteeism and missed work due to illness and health conditions (Mitchell and Bates). In 2009, Loeppke et al. stated more plainly, "A strong link exists between health and productivity."

To address the effects of decreased productivity and diminished employee health, Fabius and Clarke recommended that organizations build a culture of health. "A culture of health and wellness leverages all population health strategies."

ACHIEVING A CULTURE OF HEALTH: CHALLENGES AND MOTIVES

The purpose of shifting toward developing healthy workplace cultures is obvious after considering the rise in employer healthcare spending; however, focusing on the improvement of an organization's culture by implementing a wellness program may raise the eyebrows of those who are less informed of the importance that culture plays on the overall health of a workforce. Exhibiting program value may be the biggest hurdle for individuals responsible for ensuring the adoption and success of an employer-based wellness program.

Programs that focus on building healthy cultures seek to reverse health issues caused or worsened by traditional workplace cultures that fail to consider and sometimes devalue the well-being of employees. These problems often manifest themselves as health risks and chronic health conditions, which can become costly reminders of an unhealthy culture. One study found 22.4 percent of annual costs for a group of employers came from ten common health risk factors.

HEALTH RISK FACTORS

- Depression
- Stress
- Glucose
- Weight
- Tobacco use

- High blood pressure
- Lack of exercise
- High cholesterol
- Alcohol consumption
- Poor nutrition habits

Source: Health Affairs. November 2012

These risk factors and conditions lead to billions in spending and are routinely cited as the leading causes of death in the U.S. A workplace focused on providing a healthy culture for its employees can help drive employee engagement to either actively improve their health or address any health conditions, both of which would ultimately mitigate employer health risks and associated costs.

In a 2012 study, Goetzel et al. found compelling correlations between increased healthcare spending and obesity **(27.4 percent increase)**, high blood glucose **(31.8 percent increase)**, and high blood pressure **(31.6 percent increase)**. The study concludes, "These findings indicate ongoing opportunities for well-designed and properly targeted employer-sponsored health promotion programs to produce substantial savings."

What is not measured in Goetzel et al.'s statistics is the additional financial impact of lost productivity due to health issues, which is strongly related to the presence of chronic conditions in the workplace.

According to a 2011 study, the higher the number of health risks and conditions in a workplace, the lower the productivity. The study finds that:

"Health-related work losses are estimated to cost U.S. employers more than $260 billion each year, and may cost some companies more than direct medical expenditures." (Mitchell and Bates)

When combined with medical costs, lost work time escalates the impact on an employer's bottom line and reflects the poor or declining health of their workforce.

Implementing programs that address employee risks and health conditions in an effort to save on healthcare costs—all while helping create a culture of health for an organization—seems like a clear option for employers; however, they often encounter skeptics who believe wellness programs don't work. While an abundance of peer-reviewed studies prove the opposite, Goetzel simplifies how to anticipate and address questions about the effectiveness of a wellness program:

"The effectiveness of a program depends on whether it is well-designed, properly implemented, and credibly evaluated."

Successful wellness providers design programs that build healthy cultures as they provide comprehensive wellness solutions that drive health awareness, lower risk, improve accountability, and focus on progress-based goals. Jeff Brizzolara, Ph.D., chief clinical officer at SimplyWell®, explains:

"If you can identify employees with primary health conditions before they develop a secondary, and often more costly chronic condition, you can have a greater impact on reducing the cost of health care expenditures, increasing productivity, and improving quality of life."

Choosing a provider to implement a program that grows a culture of health in such a way can be complex. How is the culture's effectiveness measured? How are the effects of the culture maintained beyond the wellness program? And how can one program manage incentives and activities while supporting the breadth of chronic conditions that must be managed to lower costs? Despite the challenges of designing a comprehensive workplace wellness program, the value of investment is worth the effort. As Mitchell and Bates found in their study on the correlation between health and productivity loss:

"The cost estimates of lost work time presented [in this study] suggest areas where employers could concentrate efforts to address health risks and chronic conditions to improve productivity-related financial outcomes."

THE PERSONALITY OF A WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAM

The best employer wellness strategies create a certain culture that personifies the company's goals. It's not enough for an employer to simply launch a wellness program; there has to be action to ignite the change that is desired. By incorporating healthy activities and alternatives, such as two-minute fitness drills and healthy food choices, employers can foster a culture of health and motivate employees to make personal health a priority.

Attention must be paid to the ways to help sustain progress and even minimize future health risks. One way to do this is by making resources such as lifestyle and condition-specific health coaching available to individuals either dealing with one or more chronic conditions or struggling to make meaningful behavior changes on their own. The timely and personal interaction with health professionals is ideal for those who prefer more personal guidance as they set goals and work to manage their health risks and conditions. Coaching programs can partner with participants to enhance self-management strategies that aim to improve the management of chronic illnesses, reduce healthcare costs, and support lifestyle change.

Speaking to the effectiveness of health coaching and chronic condition management, Brizzolara explains:

"When coaching and disease management are implemented, employers can expect a significant increase in engagement and sustained success. More compliant chronic disease management will lead to both reduced costs related to urgent care visits and a more productive workforce."

Not only must employers provide opportunities for self-improvement, but buy-in must have a face that resonates throughout the company. This is where company leadership earns its keep. When leadership takes a stand for wellness, it can make the well-intentioned wellness program truly effective. When leaders are engaged, it helps establish a firm foundation of well-being and health in which all employees can subscribe.

WELLNESS BEST PRACTICES

- Consider the company's culture when scoping and developing the program
- Ensure leadership support and participation
- Gather data throughout the life of the program (before, during, and after) to determine its success and make changes as needed
- Communicate, communicate, communicate
- Make sure employees are motivated early on and able to set progress-based goals to sustain long-term engagement
- Choose a wellness vender that takes a consultative approach and does not insist that "one size fits all" in regards to program design
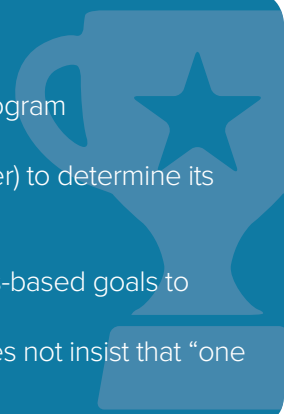
THE RIGHT WELLNESS PROGRAM

To help improve employee productivity, top-performing wellness program providers focus on achieving a reduction in health risks, improvement in preventive care compliance, and early identification of chronic health conditions before they manifest into multiple conditions. The challenge for employers is knowing how to choose the most effective wellness program that will spark behavior change and sustain high engagement in their specific culture.

To help determine the success of a wellness program before implementation begins, the following questions need to be considered:

- How will you measure your program's success?
- How will you maintain a healthy culture over time?
- How will you get and keep employees engaged?

It is essential that a workplace wellness provider helps their clients develop programs that address these questions. To support healthy cultures provided by their programs, a workplace wellness provider must deliver program reports "on demand" or in real time so program administrators can continually evaluate employee engagement and work with the provider to implement engagement drivers that move the needle in the right direction. Additionally, employers should keep records on their employees' productivity, since comparing wellness and productivity data is recommended for best results. As Loeppke et al. found in their 2009 study on health and productivity:

"Integrating productivity data with health data can help employers develop effective workplace health-human capital investment strategies."

Zhang, Bansback, and Anis found similar results in their 2011 study, stating:

"Lost productivity due to illness is substantial and should be appropriately measured and valued."

Companies must consider their true motivation for adopting a wellness program. Is it to make the company look good? Is it just to be seen by employees as "nice guys"? Or is it to make a strategic difference in the culture of the organization to ultimately improve employee health? In that case, the objectives must be audited and then measured for outcome results.

Impactful programs also develop intrinsic motivation by helping initiate and support peer-to-peer or team accountability, which begs the question: How well are employers positioning their employees to succeed at health management? A 2015 study on three different employer segments found team-based wellness programs resulted in reduced blood pressure and weight, significant reductions in hypertension, and improved eating habits and physical activity (Goldberg et al.).

CONCLUSION

Organizations should seek out wellness providers with established, replicable best practices that develop a culture of health to help sustain employee engagement and achieve higher levels of well-being. As research studies and industry thought leaders have suggested, there is a strong link between a healthy workplace culture and improved employee health and productivity. Developing a healthy culture is best accomplished when employers deploy a wellness program that examines current health data, enlists peer support, and offers services such as condition-specific health coaching.

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About SimplyWell

SimplyWell® is a workplace wellness technology company providing engaging experiences that inspire members to improve their health and empowering employers to create cultures of health and well-being.