

# Make no small plans for wellness in the workplace

By Daniel F. Rigby, RHU

You're starting a workplace wellness program in the New Year. Good for you. And, good for your bottom line.



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Do you know the most compelling business reasons for instituting wellness in your organization? No, it's not the money you can save on health care costs! Even more immediate results, studies indicate, are increased productivity, a significant reduction in absenteeism, fewer injuries and reduced worker comp claims.

In other words, a healthier workforce can be more motivated, more efficient and likely to make fewer mistakes. Wellness programs are also proving to be effective in retaining and attracting high performers, something that is at the top of most employers' wish lists.

Few people would argue that some kind of wellness initiative is not worth the time and effort. The real question is, how can you make sure your program will be alive and well a year later?

Here are three top deal breakers that can sink that well-meaning wellness effort if you let them. Resolve these issues early on and improve your odds of offering workplace wellness that actually does work.

**Top management isn't that into it.** This is critical. You need to create a culture that promotes health, and that's not going to happen without leadership by example. Employees will quickly sense it if the key folks aren't behind the program 110 percent.

It doesn't matter if your CEO and key managers are couch potatoes or seasoned athletes, everybody in the organization needs to know that they are in there with everybody else. And that's going to be true whether you have 20 employees or 2,000.

**Employees aren't buying it.** Why wouldn't employees embrace a program that is for their benefit? You probably know some of the answers to this one. People will rebel if they feel the company is just telling them what to do—especially about a matter as personal as their health.

If you spring something on employees without their input or without letting them know what to expect, don't be surprised if the program is met with skepticism, apathy or even hostility. It will be viewed as your program, not theirs. Without employee ownership, there is little hope for real life-changing results.

You can reduce or eliminate resistance by involving employees in the planning process. Conduct a survey of needs, interests and health concerns. Do you know the health/wellness issues that are most important to your employees? Find out.

Make sure you can answer key questions about your audience. What's the main demographic? What motivates them? What approaches would turn them off (or seem false)? How active are your employees? What are current workplace eating patterns and traditions? What steps should you take to reassure employees about privacy/confidentiality concerns?

If you have a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and/or multi-location organization, you want to develop a program that's going to work throughout your organization. A successful wellness program is inclusive. It is inviting and accessible to the employee who never exercises and doesn't have a firm grip on healthy eating.

**You're trying too much too soon.** Chicago planner Daniel H. Burnham urged us to make no small plans, but when it comes to a sustainable, successful workplace wellness program, it is far better to create a plan that can be introduced in small stages and monitored along the way.

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You should make no vague plans. Set clear objectives, factor in the staffing you'll need to manage and maintain the program, create a budget, and determine upfront how you are going to evaluate the program and make improvements.

Stay on track by jotting down the answers to the following questions and referring to them frequently: Why are we doing this? What do we want our wellness program to accomplish? How will the program be managed and maintained? How will we measure results?

Create a one-year (or multi-year plan) that lets you start slowly and add initiatives; develop a timeline that allows for flexibility. As you begin implementing your plan, you will discover soon enough what can

be easily managed, and what is actually working for employees. Plus, you will have saved a bundle by not purchasing gym memberships right off the bat.

Don't feel you're all alone in the planning process. Help is all around. Find out what your local hospital has to offer. Talk to your insurance broker. Find out what your insurance carrier can offer. Most major insurers have leapt into wellness with both feet. For no additional cost, your health coverage provider can probably offer a variety of wellness tools (generally via a Web site) as well as rewards for goals attained.

What will give you the biggest bang for the buck in your organization? It depends. Key areas to explore are awareness-building, education, skill-building and group/social activities. Fill in these areas with activities that make sense for your organization. This might mean providing healthy snacks for a break room, holding regular stretch breaks, or scheduling lunch and learn sessions with a trainer or dietician.

Whatever shape your wellness program takes, I recommend starting with a confidential, comprehensive health risk assessment or health evaluation. This tells employees from the outset that your organization is serious about providing the resources to support healthy lifestyles and promote a culture of wellness in the workplace.