

Why Exercise Alone is Not the Optimal Wellness Solution

When companies search for solutions for wellness and prevention programs to reduce their healthcare costs and promote employee quality of life, they invariably reach for activity based wellness programs. They are one of the most clearly defined options within healthcare reform and there is a lot of supporting evidence to suggest that regular exercise can be one of the most effective ways to manage, prevent and even reverse certain chronic conditions. With 1 out of every 7 people in the US diagnosed with a chronic illness and 45% of all deaths resulting from an chronic illness, it would follow that encouraging participation in activity based wellness programs would be most beneficial, and cost effective, for businesses, consumers and health care insurers. The reality is that instituting exercise only programs and initiatives may have little to no effect on changing the health status of your employees; in fact it may push those in a higher risk group further away from being willing to adopt wellness practices.

Creating exercise programs that fail is easy

One of the core problems with implementing wellness programs within a community or corporate group is development rarely includes adequate time to assess the actual population present. The general rule applied is to separate the population into groups by age and to design programs based upon national averages. Your company or community is going to have a very different health culture than the average. If you assume that your 30-somethings are all going to be more inclined to take up your offer of discounted fitness memberships and sign up for company charity runs you had best be prepared to be disappointed. A minimally adequate assessment is going to provide you with a lifestyle survey of your population that will put age and BMI at the bottom of the list of markers. When you take the approach of putting out fitness programs that are already designed for those who are fit and have a lifestyle that is inclined towards activity, you alienated the population that is most in need of interventive wellness. Offering fitness memberships doesn't allow for what people will do at the fitness center if they go as well. The only way to approach constructing an effective wellness program is one that takes a holistic approach because exercise is a part of wellness, but it is not the only factor at play.

Exercise is only part of the solution

If you have ever wondered how someone could be a regular runner, go to the gym and still wind up with high blood pressure, diabetes, clogged arteries or have a heart attack – the answer lies in the fact that exercise alone does not guarantee good health. It is a part of creating an environment within the body that promotes health, but it can't do it alone. Many of the people you see at the gym have some of the worst nutritional habits around. They may be able to bench-press their own weight, but their diets are so high in sodium or sugars that they are speedily developing chronic conditions. Many companies approach weight management as a matter of simple discipline with exercise, as if all it took to melt off pounds was to walk a few miles a deal. If that is all it took, there wouldn't be an epidemic of obesity in the US across every demographic. The amount that people eat, the diet that they eat, the stress that they are under and how they choose to relax after a week of work can have a greater influence on their health than how much they walk per day or how long they are on an elliptical. If you want to implement

a successful wellness program, it has to address all of these factors and it has to do so in a way that does not alienate any of your population.

Making programs too specific

In the same way that just offering too general a wellness incentive, such as a discount to a fitness center isn't going to bring you results – being too specific can have the same effect. When you create programs that specifically identify and target high risk individuals they will most likely balk at participating. Much of this has to do with the stigma as being identified as unhealthy. The rest of it has to do with the fact that all community and corporate environments are competitive on some level. If you set up tiers of perception of worth through health and fitness, the people you most need to participate will opt out of the tiers. Why place yourself in a competition when you already know you are the underdog? The goal is to create a single program for wellness that allows for internal personalization. This minimizes comparison and competition while promoting unity and communication.

Changing culture to promote activity

Trying to let one program create all this change is not going to work. You have to also assess the culture within to see whether or not it is supportive of wellness. This goes beyond making sure that there are healthy choices in vending machines and begins to involve the commitment and support of leaders within the community or corporation. It is vital that you remember that the leader of a section of people may not be the person in charge, but the person in charge has to show a commitment to supporting wellness objectives by not contradicting the goals with expectations. For example, if part of your wellness initiative focuses on handling stress, it cannot be a departmental expectation that overtime is worked to the detriment of family and personal obligations all of the time. This is tricky as this will be an unspoken expectation, but it will be a very obvious cultural one. The only way to change this type of hidden expectation is to work with management to create better methods of rotating responsibility and create new programs of project assessment and implementation.

Balancing achievement and avoiding goals

Studies have begun to show that creating specific goal oriented wellness programs, especially those revolving around weight and fitness achievements, is counter-productive. Once the goal is achieved, there is no motivation to sustain the effort. There is also a surprising backlash depression in which the thrill of working towards something is suddenly gone and this lends to people stopping their participation. A better way to structure objective programs is by working towards ladders of achievement. There must be milestones of recognition, but there should always be another level higher to go.

Sustaining motivation

With all wellness initiatives the hardest part is sustaining motivation and participation. Wellness programs mimic the cultural phenomenon of the New Year's season in the country. During the months of December and January there is a radical rise in the percent of new gym memberships and daily

attendance at fitness centers. By March, the numbers have fallen back to what they were before with 7% retention. This is why most fitness centers market so heavily during this “resolution” season. Sustaining motivation can be done if there is a clearly defined purpose for the effort. To achieve a goal is a dead end prospect, but to work toward a broader raise in the quality of life, income and opportunity can assist people in sustaining their motivation. One thing to never do with any wellness programs is to tie financial rewards of any kind to the programs. These types of incentives, including discounts to restaurants, movies and other entertainments have an opposite effect of encouraging sustained effort because they set up an unusual event in the person’s life just when they are trying to establish a routine. A better choice of material incentive would be to provide training apparel or equipment, not just training in regards to fitness or wellness, but an incentive for further training in work skills can be effectively applied too.

Blurring boundaries

Successful wellness initiatives blur the boundaries between why the person is participating. The reasons should be general enough to include work, self, home, family and relationships. The more you isolate one area of life as the reason for participating, the easier it will be for a person to justify letting that area of their life become unimportant. This returns the discussion to the importance of using lifestyle assessments in evaluating your population and then using the data to create holistic programs that include exercise, but are not dependent on exercise alone for the outcome. By having knowledge of the lifestyles present, you can also better construct programs to appeal to different health risk groups while keeping everyone connected within a common culture. Identity is essential in creating optimal wellness solutions. Participants must feel like the program reinforces their value within the group identity while retaining enough areas for personalization that allow them to retain their sense of self identity. As in all things in life, there is never one answer to any problem, but a mix of factors that have to be addressed to move towards a desired goal.