

## **The Importance of Leadership in Healthy Workplace Culture**

One thing that is interesting about the American culture is that many Americans work an immense number of hours every single year. Because of this, the workplace has become the primary place for life changes to occur, especially those related to the health and well-being of their employees. Because of this, more and more workplaces are starting to play a role in developing healthy cultures and working toward preventative care.

### **Why A Healthy Workplace Culture?**

Of course, there are other reasons for this increased interest in wellbeing. Many employers realize that if they are not investing in the health and well-being of their employees, they are going to have issues as time goes on. The biggest issue is, of course, health care. With the Affordable Care Act, more employers are now required to offer particular types of insurance to their full-time employees, which, in turn, increases the cost of health care. How do you, as an employer, offset those costs? By making sure that your employees have to use it as little as possible. How do you do that? By investing in a healthy workplace culture.

Another reason that many employers are investing in healthy cultures is because the workforce is more chronically ill than ever before. It costs a lot of money for employers when over half of all Americans have some sort of chronic illness (whether physical or mental) that affects their ability to work. In some workplaces, chronic illness is so common that employers are losing a lot of money due to a lack of productivity, because of having to pay for sick days, and because they need to make up for that missing employee somewhere, and that somewhere is likely in the productivity of the workplace.

Lastly, employers work to develop a healthy culture because it increases productivity. It's a well known fact that people who are physically healthy are also more likely to be mentally and emotionally healthy. What does this mean for the workplace? It means that employers are happier, and usually happiness increases productivity as well.

### **An Ounce of Prevention...**

Have you ever heard the expression "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?" This phrase is at the core of developing a healthy culture in your workplace. There are a few reasons for this:

- If your employees are involved in a healthy culture, they are less likely to develop chronic illnesses. Healthy workplace culture almost always overflows into the rest of the employee's life. That means that they will be likely be living healthy all of the time, and as a result, they will be better able to prevent chronic illnesses.
- If you are leading the way when it comes to preventive care, then your employees are more likely to follow. You can't just enforce these initiatives without working on them yourself. If they see you, as the employer, following the same exact guidelines and leading them in doing so, they will be more likely to follow you. There are a number of reasons for this, but most of them

revolve around realizing how serious you truly are about making health a priority for everyone in the workplace, including yourself.

- Even if your employees already have chronic illnesses, preventative care can be helpful because it can keep the symptoms of those chronic diseases at bay. Sometimes, things have already happened and there isn't much that you can do about that. So the preventive care that you can do is based in preventing the effects of those chronic illnesses. For example, if someone is diabetic, they may call off because their blood sugar is making them feel ill. You may not be able to get rid of the diabetes (in some cases you can, but not all), but the healthy living initiatives may be able to help them keep those symptoms at bay.
- Even if chronic illnesses happen anyway, preventative care can decrease the number of "sick days" that occur because of it. Sometimes, chronic illnesses occur even in spite of our best efforts. They can still negatively affect your employees, but by making a healthy workplace and encouraging healthy lifestyles, you will see that they call off much less because they "feel better" even with the symptoms.

So, the benefits of investing in the prevention of chronic illnesses are definitely worth the cost. Instead of wasting money on all of the costs that we talked about in the previous section, invest in the preventative care of your current employees. Then, you'll be sure to see better results and waste a lot less cash.

### **How to Develop a Healthy Workplace Culture**

So what do you have to do in order to develop a healthy workplace culture? How can you, as the employer, lead the way when it comes to a healthy workplace culture? Here are some ideas that companies around the world are using.

- **Encourage Activity.** Activity is one of those things that we don't think about in the workplace, because most of us spend our days in front of a computer. You can encourage activity in a number of ways; you can offer "walking meetings," where you talk about business but walk instead of sit around a table. Some companies even make a gym for their employees, or offer free/reduced price gym memberships as part of health insurance. Just encourage activity and motion.
- **Offer Incentives.** Incentives are a great way to get people moving, no matter what you are trying to get them to do. You can get creative with it. Develop competitions, offer incentives for using particular preventative care products, encourage your employees to join particular groups or do other activities for the possibility of gift cards and other prizes. Just make it fun; you'll be more likely to get participation that way.
- **Find health programs that offer preventative care at no cost to your employees.** With the Affordable Care Act, this is actually a lot more common. You want to look for those health insurance programs that offer free or low cost preventative care (exams, blood work, cancer

screenings, etc). That way, your employees will be more likely to get those screenings done because they don't have to do anything except set the appointment. Everyone wins!

- **Focus on the whole self when it comes to health care.** Too many times, we assume that health care is all about physical prevention. The issue with that point of view is that everything in our bodies is connected. Absolutely everything is important in making sure that we stay healthy. Because of this, you need to make sure that their mental and emotional health is taken care of too. If that means that you are letting employees take vacation without giving them a problem about it, then you need to do it. If that means that you offer counseling services through your company, do it. If the whole self is healthy, the whole person will be involved in their work.
- **Let your employees know that they are appreciated.** This is very important. Employees are not to be treated like a resource that can be tossed away; instead, you need to make sure that your employees realize their worth and understand that the work they are doing is valuable (even if it's the janitor or maintenance person). A lack of appreciation can actually be very detrimental on an employee's mental health, so by letting employees know you appreciate them, you're helping their mental health. It doesn't need to be elaborate; it can just be a "thank you" or recognition of something that they did that you really needed to be done.
- **Be flexible if health needs do arise.** If something does happen with your employee's health, whether it be an accident, a chronic illness, or something even more serious (cancer, surgery, etc), don't sweep them under the rug. Do what you can in order to make sure that your employee gets the time that they need. Don't pressure them to come back to work "ASAP;" encourage them to take the time to recover. Even if you have to hire someone to replace them during their recovery, make sure to let them know that their job will be there as soon as they are feeling up for it. By doing those things, you are alleviating the additional mental stress that can occur as a result of being chronically ill. Work with them, not against them, and your employees will understand that their health really is important to you, the employer.

So, if you are looking to develop a healthy culture, you have to lead the way and start making those changes in yourself as well. Leadership plays an important role in preventing health issues; by leading the way and developing a healthy culture in your workplace, you will be more likely to find that you are greatly reducing the healthcare costs that both you (as the employer) and your employees are dealing with. You will also see an increase in productivity and your employees will be much happier. Instead of trying to "just deal" with all of the changes in the world of health care, play an active role in making sure that your employees get the care that they need.