

Wellness Program Converts CEOs to the Cause

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After years of paying lip service to workplace health and wellness programs, top executives have become true believers, preaching and practicing the gospel from the top down.

“Executives are setting the tone for organizations in regards to living healthy, active lifestyles,” says Dr. Cedric Bryant, M.D., chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise. “Rank-and-file staff might worry that taking time out to go work out will be frowned upon by superiors. But then they see the top executive going to work out and everything changes.”

Bryant cites a growing body of research documenting the concrete rewards of workplace wellness programs: reduced absenteeism, improved mental alertness and acuity, better stress management, elevated mood, enhanced productivity and lowered health care claims costs. Having a boss who is a health evangelist provides a motivator that makes the best kind of business sense, according to Bryant.

“When a leader of an organization is a promoter and practitioner of fitness and healthy activity, many employees desire to emulate the boss,” he says. “Seeing the boss work out, the employee follows suit, hoping the emulation will lead down a similar path to success in all things.”

Trickle-down wellness

That top-dog prestige underlies the premise of Leading By Example, an initiative to improve health policy and practices nationwide by enlisting the aid of CEOs. The program was dreamed up by Partnership for Prevention, a Washington-based, bipartisan nonprofit that seeks to improve the nation's health care systems.

Garry Lindsay, director of business partnerships for Partnership for Prevention, got the idea for the program when then-Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson invited high-profile business executives to Washington for a 2003 conference on obesity. Lindsay and Partnership staff “kidnapped” a handful of CEOs, diverting them to their own unaffiliated meeting.

The guerrilla tactic paid off. In spring 2005, Leading by Example was launched with 19 high-profile executives, including CEOs of such Fortune 200 companies as Xerox,

Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer and Procter & Gamble. Three state governors - Mike Huckabee (R-Ark.), Bob Taft (R-Ohio) and Mark Warner (D-Va.) - also signed up.

“We wanted a mix of companies in and out of health care,” Lindsay says. “We targeted executives in companies that had exemplary health care programs.” Leading by Example participants were chosen on the strength of their programs and the extent to which their corporate culture reinforces employee wellness.

Leading by example harnesses the corporate clout of the CEO's name and company logo for its program materials. The idea is to get other companies to emulate the exemplary company's success in the health care arena. This is done by highlighting the goals and methods of the company's health and wellness efforts on one hand, and secondly, by getting CEOs to proselytize the pro's of health care to other executives.

If need be, Lindsay won't hesitate to win CEOs over to the cause with a little spin. He tells them Leading by Example as an easy way to build good public relations. He sells them on the idea that “they and their companies will be shining examples of the value of investing in public health.”

Working out on the railroad

The trickle-down theory of health promotion seeped far enough into the corporate culture of Union Pacific Railroad to earn the company a 2003 Healthy Workplace award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“Our health and wellness programs are promoted by everyone from the highest executive levels all the way down to middle management,” says Marcy Zauha, Union Pacific's director of health and safety.

Zauha credits top Union Pacific executives with fully funding and supporting programs that encompass health promotion, physical activity, health risk assessment and intervention, chronic disease management and smoking cessation. But she lavishes praise on middle managers, too.

With 48,000 employees across 23 states, Union Pacific decentralizes health promotion out of necessity. Managers of individual business units are responsible for incorporating health and fitness into annual planning.

The railroad has struck agreements with 575 health clubs throughout its service area, so employees are never without free convenient access to a gym.

The railroad's commitment brought home significant results, Zauha reports. Between 1990 and 2001, health care claims costs related to lifestyle choices went from 29% to

18.8%. A smoking cessation campaign helped lower the population of smokers from 40% of the total workforce in 1990 to 24% at present.

Politically correct fitness

With before-and-after photos that rival Subway's Jared Fogle, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee has become a poster politician for fitness. Huckabee was closing in on 300 pounds when he went on a health kick, dropped 110 of those pounds and put his diabetes in remission. As chairman of the National Governors' Association, Huckabee launched a public health and fitness campaign, dubbed Healthy America Initiative, enlisting the aid of five other governors, including first-term California governor and seven-time Mr. Universe Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“As a society, we have spent years punishing people for bad health behaviors, but we have never really rewarded people for good health choices,” Huckabee said in his Leading by Example testimonial.

Lindsay is optimistic about the prospects for the young program.

“In the short term, we want to get to the tipping point on the number of CEOs it takes to move the program forward.”

The long term? Lindsay won't soft pedal his high hopes for the program.

“Our ultimate goal is the transformation of the health care system. Something's got to happen.”