

Why Many Corporate Wellness Programs Are Barely Breathing

By John Kahle, Chief Wellness Officer, Intercare Insurance Solutions

Most employers offer some form of wellness benefits. From discounts on gym memberships to personal health coaching, employers are beginning to acknowledge the need for wellness. There are reasons, however, why many corporate wellness programs never reach their full potential.

The following essential elements breathe life into a corporate wellness program that merely exists and elevates it to one that achieves its full promise of a healthier, more productive workforce.

Clearly State the Goal

The goals of the corporate wellness program define its value. They answer the question “What is the employer hoping to achieve?” With goals in place, the program administrators can identify categories for measurement. However, few things in life or in a wellness program remain static. New hires, downsizing and even a change of the seasons affect the focus of corporate wellness programs. Effective programs respond to these inevitable changes quickly and with flexibility.

Constant Monitoring

Long before rolling out a successful corporate wellness program, a lot of effort must go into making it viable. Ensuring the continued vitality of a corporate wellness program requires constant monitoring. The key is staying relevant throughout the program. Employers cannot do that without constant monitoring.

When evaluating health assessments, for example, the data does not mean much without adjustments for employee turnover. A corporate wellness program that starts with 400 participants and loses 200 to layoffs often requires a change in data analysis. In another example, a communication campaign on flu season and flu shots does not have the same relevance during the summer, so remove postings from a company bulletin board or intranet when the flu season months end. To maintain relevance, the program needs a continuous review of data, strategies, goals and objectives. Taking the pulse of the corporate wellness program at regular intervals keeps it moving forward.

Measuring the Vital Signs

Data provides the vital signs for measuring the effectiveness of the program. Measuring the right data is like a physician ordering the right diagnostic test. If 50 percent of participants of a corporate wellness program attend an educational class on diabetes, it might appear very successful. However, if the 50 percent who did not attend were identified through screenings as high-risk candidates for diabetes, the results are suddenly not as relevant.

The collection of data is critical but the results are more than just numbers. Knowing that a person’s total cholesterol count is 260 has real significance when compared to a high-risk category of 240 or higher. So, while employers are encouraged to measure, measure, measure, they should not lose sight of the relevance of the data. Partnering with a third party provides employers with help in identifying the right data, collecting it and analyzing results.

The Science of Motivation

There is a science to motivation. Therapists who understand the science get patients on their feet sooner. As a patient improves, the motivation evolves. The same is true with corporate wellness programs. Successful programs start with participation, move to individual accountability and behavior change, which eventually leads to improved health status. It is a balance of matching the right incentive to the action and knowing when participants must walk the walk. Here is an example of an evolving incentive.

A wellness program offers incentives for participants with a specified waist measurement. In the beginning, employees self-report their waist measurements. The reward is a \$25 credit toward the annual deductible. In the second year, the reward is a \$50 credit. The program moves from self-reporting to requiring a professional to record the measurement. The next phase is an overall improved health status with a higher incentive. The employee must satisfy a series of specified measurements, such as waist measurement, cholesterol, blood pressure, etc. to qualify. Proof of compliance requires confirmation from a physician. The multi-year process progressed from participation to accountability and behavior change to improved health status.

Another element in the science of motivation is the family. Leaving the family unit out of the corporate wellness program invites failure. Most health decisions are made in the home. For the person trying to lose weight, including the family meal planner provides a supportive environment and encourages success. The most effective programs use the same incentives and requirements for each participant – employee or dependent.

Often the reason for excluding dependents is a financial one. The value of a healthy family unit makes adding dependents as soon as possible a major goal for successful programs. At a minimum, the delivery of wellness communications to the home allows review by all family members. Combining the right environment with the right incentives is using the science of motivation.

Marketing a Brand Prescription

Branding the wellness program provides name identity and recognition. It means even more if there is employee involvement in the creation of the corporate wellness brand. Employers want to sell their wellness program and what better way than to make employees the sales agents. Employees involved in branding, own it and believe in it.

With branding and all communication, understanding the employee population is vital. For some employers, there are diverse segments to their employee population. Each segment may have its own unique culture and require separate communications. When developing new products or services, most companies study demographics and other characteristics of their target markets. Using that same approach in studying their employee population ensures successful wellness campaigns.

Generic communication is a prescription for employee apathy. The branding and customization of the corporate wellness program engages employees in the process and helps integrate a healthy lifestyle into the company culture.

Annual Check-up

Annual check-ups have saved the lives of many people who ignored symptoms or had no symptoms. The only way to know if the wellness program is thriving is by doing an annual check-up.

It comes full circle, back to the work a company did to clearly state their goals and identify measurements of success. Is it lower premiums, increased utilization of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or more people in the Disease Management program? Identifying the success establishes both the starting and ending point. For example, if the success is increased EAP utilization, the starting point is the current utilization. The ending point is the targeted percentage of utilization. Through constant monitoring and measuring, the employer knows where the program is in relation to its goal. If utilization is low, taking action like focused EAP communication or events sponsored by the EAP vendor may improve results.

Examples for benchmarking categories include medical, dental, vision, prescription, disability and workers compensation claim costs, absenteeism, productivity, and levels of employee engagement in the program. The tools for measurement include health assessments and screenings, employee surveys and claim data reports.

As the name implies, the annual check-up occurs every year and adjusts to changing needs and results. Well-developed benchmarks position the annual check-up as a reality check on the health of the corporate wellness program.

Getting Off Life Support

Many corporate wellness programs are gasping from neglect. Employers do not attain their full return on investment without ongoing commitment and nurturing. Long-lasting corporate wellness programs involve employees and their families, take pride in ownership, and create a unique niche in the corporate culture. To sustain a long and healthy life for the corporate wellness program, remember the four Ms – monitoring, measuring, motivation and marketing. They breathe life into a barely breathing corporate wellness program and can transform it into a life-changing success.

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