



The Search for Wellness Gold

Three Ideas to Get Your Wellness Program on the WorkWell Massachusetts Podium

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In a global marketplace plagued with soaring healthcare costs and intensifying business competition, workplace health and well-being programs are prominently positioned to help solve some of these demanding challenges. Companies now recognize the value of investing in employee health and wellbeing is that it is not only the right thing to do, but also a business imperative (NBGH, 2010). Decades of evidence reveal worksite wellness programs drive health outcomes, while they reduce healthcare costs, boost productivity and increase profit margins (Fabius et al., 2016). However not without their criticism (Frakt & Carroll, 2014), as several programs repeatedly are demonstrating impact while others are under-delivering (Osilia et al., 2012).

As the Massachusetts leading authority in guiding organizations in their creation of comprehensive wellness programs, the Worksite Wellness Council

of Massachusetts (WWCMA) initiated the WorkWell Massachusetts Awards in 2015 to identify exemplary wellness programs throughout the Commonwealth. Through a HERO Scorecard application process, a panel of wellness experts for the Council assessed the key program characteristics that are part of the most successful Massachusetts employer-based wellness programs.

Based on the analysis of the WorkWell Massachusetts Award winners and current industry research and literature in the field, **we have identified three main challenges wellness leaders experience that limit wellness program effectiveness.** This paper will address these three key areas of wellness programming and steps that you as a wellness professional can take to create a culture of health in your organization through comprehensive wellness programming.

IDEA #1

Don't Guess - Assess

The long-term success of any wellness program is intrinsically linked to understanding the actual behavioral risks that are driving your health-related costs. The top WorkWell Massachusetts Awards winners demonstrated superior program results through measurement and evaluation programs that identified their risks. Despite the value of a well-designed evaluation program, it is all too often sidestepped, or not executed in a meaningful way. Many organizations revealed that that they have either not attempted to measure their program or experienced difficulty evaluating programs and outcomes. This is fairly consistent with a large national employer survey conducted by the National Business Group on Health (NBGH) that found 27% do not measure outcomes and 65% have no measurable goals (NBGH, 2010).

A core tenant of program effectiveness relies on identifying the health risks that drive cost and implementing programs that address these risks/health behaviors (Goetzel et al., 2014). To achieve this, wellness leaders need to use the data uncovered in the assessment phase to understand the health behaviors that are driving cost, and design programs that will achieve pre-defined outcomes.

Measuring and evaluating wellness programs may feel like a daunting task. However, it is actually very straightforward when you understand the two key pieces of information needed to optimize your wellness programming. With hundreds of measures to choose, thousands of employees to manage, and profuse amounts of data, it is important to simplify the process to gather only key information to guide program efforts. Being data rich but information poor will lead to complexity and inferior outcomes.

To gather only key information, we encourage you to break your measurement and evaluation process into two key steps:

- 1. Start with Wellbeing Assessments:**
They provide information about which wellness areas to focus on.
- 2. Continue with Process & Outcome Evaluations:**
They provide feedback on your current program and how to adjust the program for continued success.

Wellbeing Assessments: What should we do?

To design effective programming, wellness leaders need information that not only highlights your organization's critical health risks, but also the behaviors that can change them, programs that influence the behaviors and incentives to motivate the entire desired behavior change (*see figure 1*). This process begins with a comprehensive wellbeing assessment that provides key insights into your population's health risks. The key distinction of comprehensive wellness assessments is that they are multidimensional, comprised of all factors that together define an individual's wellbeing.



Figure 1.

Despite lack of consensus on defining ‘wellbeing’, there is growing evidence that factors beyond physical health impact our wellness and business outcomes (Gandy et al., 2016). Most agree measures should incorporate factors beyond physical health, including emotional, mental health, work environment, and life evaluation/purpose (Cooper, 2016). For example, traditional health screens may reveal an obesity problem in your organization, but mental, emotional, and work environment measures will tell you what your population is ready to change and whether programs should focus on nutrition, exercise, or stress reduction to fix it (Goh et al., 2015).



RECOMMENDED ACTION ITEM

For a truly comprehensive assessment of your population, consider going beyond physical health measures (traditional health risk assessments (HRA), biometric screenings) and include psychosocial measures (e.g., mental health, emotional health, motivations and need states, stress, work environment, purpose, etc.).

Process & Outcomes Evaluations: Is it working?

Evaluating the process and outcomes will tell you what is working, and as needed, guide any changes required for program success. Behavior change, after all, is an art and a science. Process and outcome measures can include participation, adherence, mitigation of health risks, improvements in clinical measures, claims, program costs, and satisfaction. Collectively, evaluating processes and outcomes serves as a feedback loop to guide programming strategy, and optimizes efficiencies by tailoring offerings.

IDEA #2**Think Bigger**

All too often organizations are making critical wellness programming decisions based on unsupported assumptions, or by looking at what other companies have accomplished hoping to replicate their success. However, trusting gut instincts or relying on what works for another company may not be effective for your organization. The WorkWell Massachusetts Awards evaluation process found that although organizations identified critical health risk factors and implemented targeted programs to address them, many resulted only in modest improvements. This highlights a gap between what we are addressing and where the change is needed.

To demonstrate this point, a recent meta-analysis (summarizing over 228 studies) found stress incurred at the workplace significantly impacted employee health outcomes (Goh et al., 2016). These findings emphasize

our workplace environments and cultures may be the source of health risks that our very own wellness programs have been trying to address. To put this in perspective, wellness programs may find it challenging to engage employees in a walking or nutrition program if they are struggling with toxic work relationships or financial burdens.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION ITEM**

Wellness leaders should consider broadening their scope to incorporate non-medical workplace stressors that fall outside of traditional wellness programming. Some examples of these challenges can include: work-family conflicts, long work hours, perceived lack of fairness, low social support, and low job control. Sometimes, the most immediate challenges can be right in front of us; we just need to look for them.

IDEA #3

Wellness on a Budget: Culture of Health through Communication

Though not an award criteria, The WorkWell Massachusetts Awards Gold recipients invest more than 3x per employee than other awardees. However, constrained budgets need not constrain your wellness program efforts. There are many successful programs being run at smaller organizations with much tighter budgets.

The most recent scientific insight into cutting workplace wellness costs is creating a culture of health. Unfortunately, few wellness initiatives build culture, enthusiasm and engagement that fuel ongoing participation and engagement (Seaverson et al., 2009). Focusing on isolated 'perks' and programs will not have any real impact unless they are woven into the

overall culture that permeates all aspects of company life. Creating a culture of health went from buzzword to a science, with key elements that can be measured and universally applied to your wellness program (Kent et al., 2016). At the core of any successful culture is active communication of promoting health as an important value and business imperative. As a wellness leader, you can create a culture of health by shifting the paradigm from leading with carrots to leading with communication. In other words, by improving your communications strategy you can significantly cut spending on financial incentives and achieve higher participation rates (Taitel et al., 2008).



RECOMMENDED ACTION ITEM

Consider building your strategic communication initiatives by engaging 1) senior leadership, to communicate a clear vision and demonstrate a commitment to health; 2) middle management, to build momentum through alignment of resources, and further communicate a shared mission and measurable objectives; and 3) individual workers, who become empowered to improve their health through self-activation and feeling responsible for personal health improvements (Kent et al., 2016). Successful application of a communication strategy will embed and permeate your wellness initiatives into the workplace while building sustainable and effective programs.

Change Begins with You

With the rising value of healthy employees and workplaces (Fabius et al, 2016), wellness leaders, more than ever before, have the ability to positively impact their organization's business objectives through focused health and wellbeing initiatives. To affect the greatest change, we need to step beyond the traditional suite of wellness services and challenge ourselves to achieve a real value on investment in wellness. Take the first step by integrating proven scientific best practices by applying wellbeing assessments and program evaluations (physical and psychosocial), think broader to identify key drivers to enhance program effectiveness and a more robust communication strategy to drive employee adoption.

About the Massachusetts Worksite Wellness Council

The Worksite Wellness Council of Massachusetts (WWCMA) is the preeminent, independent, and objective resource for health promotion in the workplace. A 501c3 not-for-profit member organization, WWCMA champions wellness programs that help employers encourage healthy employees, healthy families, and healthy communities across the Commonwealth. The council offers innovative wellness best practice programs, training, and events along with insightful resources and tools to help educate and advance Massachusetts organizations and their corporate wellness teams. Visit us at wwcma.org and follow us @WorkWellMass.

The WorkWell Massachusetts Award Program

The WorkWell Massachusetts Award Program aims to recognize Massachusetts employers for their exemplary work in worksite health promotion. Winners are recognized at the WWCMA's Annual Worksite Wellness Conference.

The WorkWell Massachusetts Award program criteria is based on the following:

1. The HERO Health and Well-being Best Practices Scorecard in Collaboration with Mercer® – a tool designed to help organizations learn about best practices, discover opportunities to improve their programs, and measure progress over time.
2. In addition, applicants are required to provide details on their strategic planning and organizational support, program design and implementation, participant engagement, and measurements and evaluation.

Employers are eligible to earn a Gold, Silver, or Bronze award. WWCMA appointed a Peer Review committee of independent industry professionals to review the applications and designate the award winners and categories.

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Resources

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