

Gaining leadership support for creating a culture of health

Strong leadership support for work site wellness is essential to your organization's success in creating a **culture of health*** at your workplace. That support might come from the head of the organization or a member of senior leadership.

Your organization must be able to rely upon this leader to be visible and vocal in advocating for recommended changes. He or she must ensure that the organization allocates adequate resources (staff, time and money) to improve and maintain the workplace policies, physical environment and social norms. Sustainability for a work site wellness initiative is possible only with strong leadership support.

Success depends on having a top leader approve and support the use of resources:

- Staff to lead the wellness initiative
- Time for communications staff to draft messages and send communications regarding the wellness initiative
- Time for employees to participate on a wellness committee during work hours
- Funds to support regular meetings of the wellness committee (by paying for substitute teachers, mileage reimbursement, videoconferencing and the like)
- The strategy proposed by the wellness committee
- The implementation of the strategy and work plan
- Funds to support the tasks within the strategy and work plan

Specific features of leadership support include:

- At least quarterly, the leader — who could be the president, CEO, administrator, city manager, school district superintendent, school principal or store manager, for example — communicates his or her support for work site wellness initiatives to all employees
- Leadership provides a budget that supports the wellness work plan and allows for year-round work site wellness efforts geared toward all employees
- At least one member of the leadership team actively participates on the wellness committee
- Members of the leadership team visibly model healthy behaviors at the workplace (for example, they eat healthfully, take walk breaks, hold walking meetings, serve healthy options at all meetings and events, and the like)

***What is a culture of health?** A culture of health is a shift from centering only on individual health efforts to efforts toward building a workplace environment that supports healthy behaviors for all.

Examples include:

- Regular communication from leadership that promotes wellness initiatives
- No tobacco use in buildings, on grounds, in vehicles or at events
- Healthful food options served at meetings and events
- Vending machines that offer at least 30 percent healthful items – and at a reduced price compared with less healthful items
- At least three places for physical activity are provided at, or near, the workplace

Here are suggestions for leveraging champions and allies as you begin to recruit leadership support for work site wellness.

Identify a leader to champion the initiative

In a small organization, a single leader may be the clear choice to champion the creation of a culture of health. In a larger organization, look for the leader who has the authority to influence others in the highest levels of the company. The champion need not be the most physically fit member of leadership. Rather, look for a leader with the disposition to be a visible and vocal supporter of workplace policies that encourage healthy behaviors.

Organizations with multiple sites can consider whether it would be useful to have an executive champion at each site.

Find allies

A number of individuals within your organization may already recognize the value of a culture of health — human resources staff, occupational/safety coordinators, union representatives, risk management staff, parks and recreation staff, health educators, coaches and school nurses, for example. Obtain their support for employee health improvement; that support could be an agreement to participate visibly in support for workplace changes that will help to build a culture of health, or it could be a contribution of staff time, financial support, in-kind resources or an agreement to endorse and support policy and environmental changes.

Use what you know about leadership styles and the decision-making process within your organization

Every organization is different. Build leadership support for creating a culture of health in the way that makes the most sense for your organization. Think about the following as you plan how to approach leadership for support:

- What are the current pressures and priorities facing leaders in your organization? How could a healthier workforce support those priorities?
- How do leaders prefer to receive data: written documents? verbal presentations?
- What kinds of information are likely to influence decisions? Do you need data specific to your organization, or are state or national data sufficient? Are leaders more influenced by internal factors or by what other organizations are doing?
- Whom would leaders view as a credible messenger for this information? Does another team of individuals carry more clout than someone from human resources, for example?
- How do decisions *really* get made in your organization? Informal committee meetings? Board? Formal or informal meetings between executives? Plan accordingly.

Build a business case

There is a reason that more employers are finding a way to promote employee health via changes in the workplace environment and policies: It makes good business sense. Employees with healthy behaviors, on average, are more productive when at work (higher presenteeism)¹ and incur lower health care costs than employees with less healthy behaviors.^{2,3}

Lowest Cost Trends

Companies with the lowest cost trends are most likely to have senior leaders that visibly support the campaign for a healthy work environment.

14th Annual National Business Group on Health/Watson Wyatt Survey Report 2009

Culture of Health

Workplace programs embedded within a healthy company culture are more likely to succeed than those that are not embedded. A healthy company culture allows for the use of company equipment, facilities and other forms of infrastructure to support healthy behaviors. In larger companies, physical plants are used to house fitness centers, on-site health education classes and cafeterias featuring healthy food choices. Employers embodying a healthy culture can establish policies to reinforce desired behaviors and brand health improvement programs in ways that mirror other organizational initiatives.

Goetzel, R.Z, and Ozminkowski, R.J. *The Health and Cost Benefits of Worksite Health Promotion*. *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 2008. 29:303–23

Increase employee effectiveness

Amid the economic downturn, many U.S. and Canadian companies remain committed to keeping their programs that improve the health and productivity of their employees. According to a November 2009 report by the National Business Group on Health and Watson Wyatt Worldwide, companies with the most effective health and productivity programs saw:

- 11 percent higher revenue per employees;
- 1.8 fewer days absent per employee;
- 28 percent higher shareholder returns; and
- And 1.2 percentage points lower in medical trends.

2009/2010 North American Staying@Work Report,
National Business Group on Health and Watson Wyatt Worldwide

¹ Bunn, JOEM, 2006, 48:10.

² Foldes, Bland, An et al. Modifiable Health Risks and Short-Term Health Care Costs. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota internal research, submitted for publication.

³ Anderson, 2000, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 15:1.

You don't have to convince employees to make changes

2007 survey of Minnesotans

- 69 percent of obese Minnesotans are trying to lose weight
- 53 percent of overweight Minnesotans are trying to lose weight (80 percent of those trying to lose weight are willing to eat less and eat better.)

Physical Activity and Healthy Eating in Minnesota: Addressing Root Causes of Obesity.
Executive Summary. May 2010. Minnesota Department of Health and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.

2007 Minnesota Adult Tobacco Survey (MATS)

- A majority of smokers want to quit smoking. In 2010, 54.6 percent of current adult Minnesota smokers stopped smoking for one day or longer in the past year because they were trying to quit. That's about 340,000 current smokers in Minnesota who actively tried to quit.

Minnesota Adult Tobacco Survey (MATS). *Tobacco Use in Minnesota 1999 to 2010.*
www.mnadulttobaccosurvey.org

Employees make behavior changes

A 2008 study concluded that worksite health promotion programs reduced tobacco use, dietary fat consumption, high blood pressure and total cholesterol levels, and days of work lost — all while increasing productivity.⁵

Goetzel RZ, Ozminkowski RJ. *The Health and Cost Benefits of Work Site Health Promotion Programs: Annual Review of Public Health 2008.* <http://www.annualreviews.org/>.

Maintain the support once you have it

Once you have appropriate support, ensure that you retain it by regularly updating leaders on employee health and progress toward creating a culture that promotes health. Ask upper management how often they want to receive progress reports.