



Creating a Culture of Health in Your Organization

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With so much data available showing the benefits of healthy employees, why would any organization *not* want to encourage better health for its workforce? After all, healthier employees are more productive, miss less work due to illness, cost employers less for health care, and generally have a more positive outlook on life (which carries into their work). But if employee wellness hasn't been given the attention it deserves at your company, what can you do to help create a worksite culture of health?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a culture of health in the workplace requires that employee health and safety be valued, supported, and promoted through workplace health programs, policies, benefits, and environmental supports. It's management communicating the following message to employees: "This is what we do here. Supporting employees in achieving their personal wellness goals is a part of who we are."

It's true: If you can create a social norm in an organization where people are interested in health – such as being physically active daily and eating healthful meals – you can create an atmosphere of change. Even the most unhealthful and skeptical employees are more likely to jump on the bandwagon and start adopting healthier lifestyles if they see their co-workers doing so. If you spend time with people who like to hike, bike, or work out at the gym, what does it make you want to do? The common experience is that you will want to hike, bike, or go to the gym as well. Most people like to fit in with what they perceive to be the social norm.

Creating a culture of health in your workplace can have a profound, positive influence on your company. Below are steps you can take to create a healthy lifestyle norm in your organization.

Key Steps

1. First, management must show a commitment to improving health and preventing disease. Wellness budgets and healthy work policies need to be established, and wellness events need to be planned and promoted. Participation and leadership is essential from C-level executives, department heads, and mid-level managers, including the human resources director and safety manager. All levels of management need to work together and model desired behaviors – publicly and enthusiastically – being visibly engaged and “walking the talk.” Here are some ideas to consider:

- Have managers wear pedometers at work, and make them available to employees at no cost.
- Map out one-mile routes around your facility and have management team members join employee groups in brisk walks once or twice a day.
- Conduct meetings while walking.
- Even if your organization doesn't have an onsite health facility, provide employees access to a nearby gym (and make sure employees see the CEO and other leadership team members making time to use it).

2. Secondly, companies need to focus their efforts on the most important components of wellness: being physically active, eating healthfully, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, abstaining from smoking, and effectively managing stress. For example, physical activity is essential because it improves nearly every area of health, including:

- Preventing heart attacks
- Preventing diabetes
- Controlling weight
- Preventing high blood pressure
- Lowering the risk of cancer – especially bowel, breast, prostate, and pancreatic cancers
- Improving mental outlook and decreasing stress and depression – two of the most costly health problems for companies

3. Next, ensure that your organization's physical environment is conducive to healthy living. Encourage employees to take the stairs by painting stairwells a pleasant color or decorating them with artwork. Make sure your facility is well-lighted, clean, and free from safety hazards. Provide work areas that are ergonomically correct, as well as healthier alternatives to sitting all day, such as standing workstations, for those who would prefer alternatives. If possible, open windows to keep fresh air circulating. Ban tobacco use on work premises. And help employees balance work and personal life, which might mean accommodating flexible work schedules or allowing employees to telecommute one or two days a week if appropriate.

4. To encourage good nutrition in the workplace and support healthy weight goals, provide healthy foods in vending machines, such as nuts, apples, small packages of baby carrots, bottled water, and 100% fruit juices. If your facility has a cafeteria, consider subsidizing the cost of healthy foods and keeping a higher cost on unhealthy foods (or only serving healthy food options). Provide kitchen facilities so employees can easily prepare a healthful meal. Make it your policy to provide only nutritious foods at work events and meetings (both onsite and off-site).

5. Give each employee the opportunity to complete an annual health assessment, including a free biometric screening, and help them learn their personal health risks and strengths. Coordinate and offer lifestyle improvement opportunities, such as disease-prevention classes, lunch-and-learns, and self-study resources. Provide a daily wellness tip via email or your company's intranet. Distribute a health newsletter to employees at least once a month. Open up a private meeting room at your facility for an employee weight-loss support group. Leave blood pressure monitors in break rooms for self-checks. Encourage employees to use accrued vacation time to prevent burnout and accumulated stress.

6. Most people have a basic knowledge of what they need to do to live healthfully; they just need help getting it done. Incentives help people get motivated. When wellness is a core value of an organization, healthy behaviors will be rewarded. Offer meaningful compensation for healthy behaviors, such as paying more of the employee's portion of health insurance premiums when they participate in your organization's wellness

program. Make your company wellness program available to spouses and dependents to participate in as well.

There are many ways you can develop a culture of health in your organization. No matter which methods you choose, be sure to keep wellness in the forefront of your employees' minds, goals, and actions. Communicate your wellness message frequently; model it continually. And most of all, keep it fun and rewarding.