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# Health & Productivity MANAGEMENT

Spring 2009

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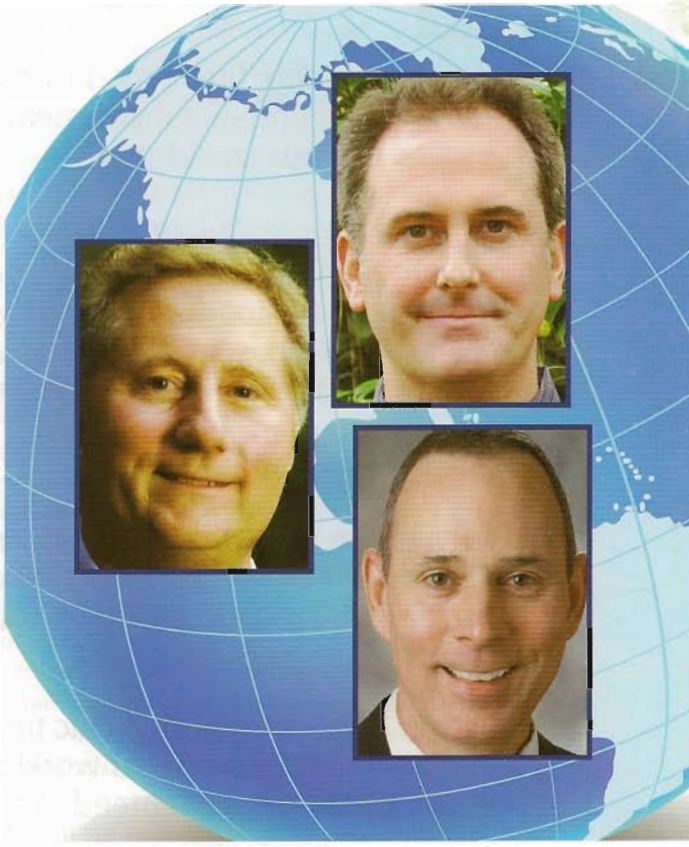

**John Schaab**, Corporate Ergonomist, Intel (top)
**Judd Allen**, PhD, President, Human Resources Institute (center)
**Ed Jones, PhD**, Executive Vice President, Commercial Division, ValueOptions

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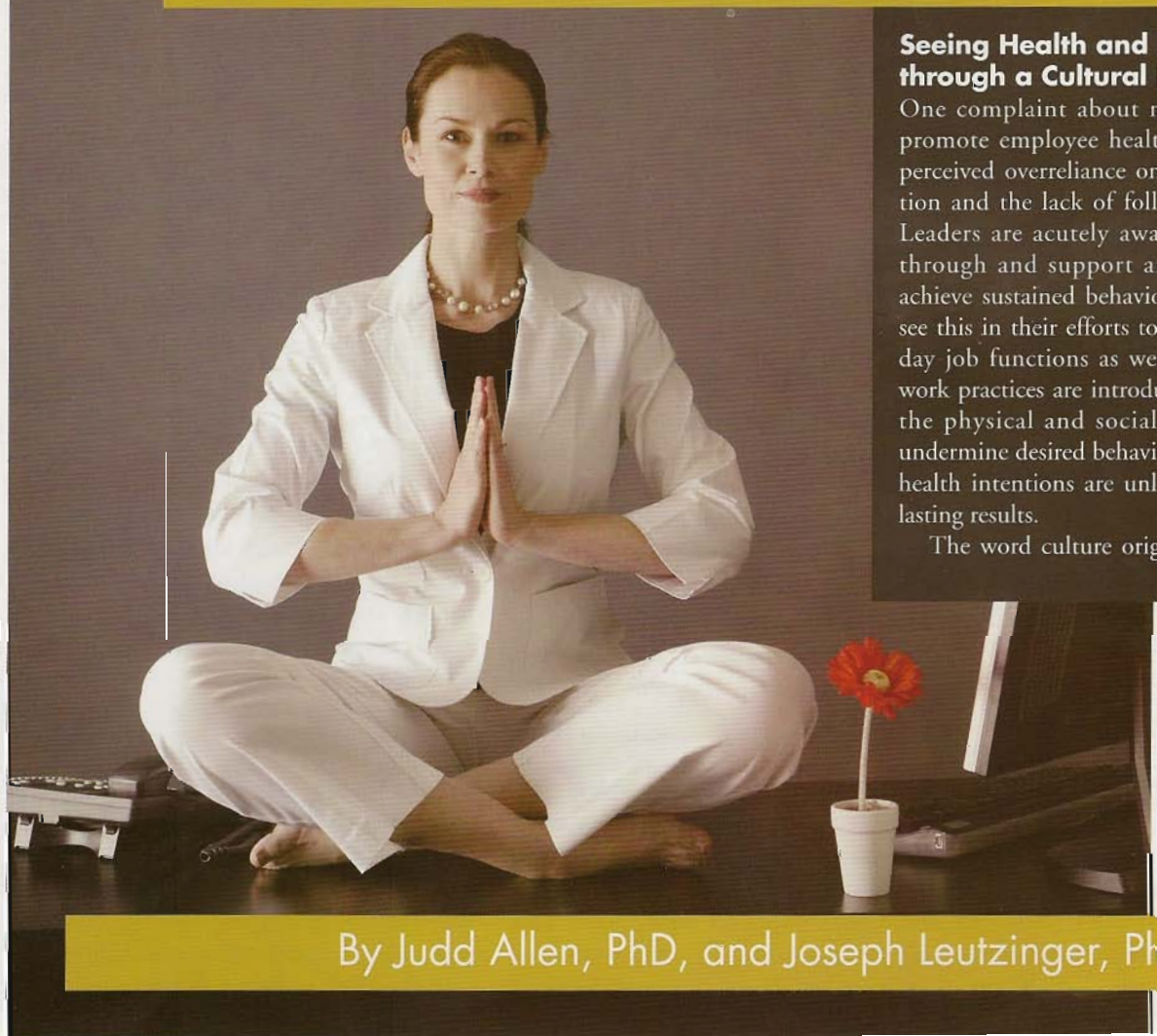
# Achieving a Healthy and Productive Workplace Culture

**Advocates of health and productivity management propose that businesses adopt a more proactive approach to employee health. The vision is organized around the following broad principles:**

1. **People now account for a substantial proportion of the value of most businesses. The new health and productivity management approach brings human and social capital development in line with modern business realities. The traditional business model views human resources as a cost of doing business rather than an investment opportunity. The health and productivity model calls for an investment in employee health as an asset.**
2. **Businesses should track information about the health and productivity of employees so related goals can be set and interventions properly evaluated.**
3. **Current efforts to address employee health tend to be highly segmented. Corporate services for benefits, disability, employee assistance, safety and health improvement have typically been managed separately. When integrated, a coherent and synergistic framework for employee health supports the full productive potential of employees.**



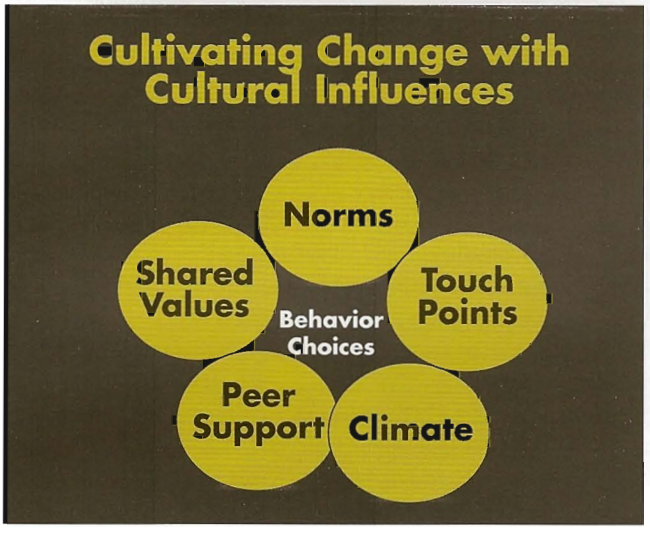
## Seeing Health and Productivity through a Cultural Lens

One complaint about many efforts to promote employee health has been the perceived overreliance on initial motivation and the lack of follow-up support. Leaders are acutely aware that follow-through and support are necessary to achieve sustained behavior change. They see this in their efforts to address day-to-day job functions as well as when new work practices are introduced. As long as the physical and social environments undermine desired behavior, even the best health intentions are unlikely to achieve lasting results.

The word culture originates from the

By Judd Allen, PhD, and Joseph Leutzinger, PhD

concept of cultivation. In the case of health and productivity management, the goal is to create a social environment that cultivates employee health. The five dimensions shown in the figure below provide a framework for cultural analysis and change:




**Shared Values** are similar to group and organizational priorities. The goal is to place employee health and productivity among the top priorities. Fortunately, health and productivity management offers numerous benefits. Many of the following benefits are likely to be of interest to employees at all levels.

## A Full Value Proposition for Health and Productivity

- **Reduce Health Risks.** Healthy lifestyles, preventive healthcare and workplace safety reduce the likelihood of illness and premature death.
- **Control Illness Care and Its Costs.** Health reduces the need for medicine. Good preventive care addresses illnesses before they become costly to treat.
- **Heal.** Effective disease and disability management often include new positive lifestyle practices. Appropriate use of medical care makes for a speedier recovery.
- **Deliver Peak Performance.** Most athletes know that a healthy lifestyle and good mental health improve personal performance.
- **Achieve Life Balance.** Work, rest, and play make us feel good. A balanced life also increases the likelihood of sustained effort. It lowers burnout.
- **Provide Opportunities to Assist.** Supporting the health of coworkers, family and friends adds meaning and purpose to life.
- **Enhance Teamwork/Morale.** Program participation has a social side. Healthy activities provide employees with opportunities to know each other, beyond job roles.
- **Improve Image.** Customers and the general public have a more favorable attitude toward organizations that treat employees well and support public health. On a personal level, good health and fitness can improve personal attractiveness.

Many health and productivity initiatives emphasize the economic benefit to the company. This may appeal to executives, but many employees will find other benefits of greater interest. Fortunately, there is nothing inconsistent about being pleased with saving both money and lives. To increase the perceived value of health and productivity, a full value proposition needs to be articulated.

**Cultural norms** are sometimes referred to as "the way we do things around here." Norms can be formal and written into policy, but many operate outside formal rules or even conscious awareness. New health and productivity norms are important culture change goals.

- **Those with job functions that support employee health need to:**
  - Use shared metrics.
  - Coordinate resources.
  - Communicate about health with a consumer-friendly and coherent voice.
  - Empower employees to take a more proactive role in their own health.
- **Employees need to:**
  - Participate in the health and productivity management programs.
  - Pursue healthy lifestyles.
  - Become a careful consumer of medical resources.
  - Find ways to reduce the impact of chronic conditions on job performance.
  - Support the health of their coworkers.
- **Leaders need to:**
  - Articulate a shared health and productivity vision including why it is important and how to participate.
  - Serve as effective role models including participating in health and productivity programs, visibly pursuing healthy lifestyles and making responsible health decisions.
  - Align rewards and other organizational policies and procedures so they support and do not undermine employee health.
  - Monitor and celebrate success including assessing and acknowledging bottom-line results, employee participation and organizational culture change.

**Cultural Touch Points** are means for maintaining and establishing norms. Organizational policies, procedures and programs help establish norms – for example, no-smoking policies. Unwritten and informal touch points also influence behavior. The policy of a 40-hour work week and a lunch break, for example, can be overpowered by rewards and praise for doing extra work.

Touch points can be better aligned with health and productivity goals. The following questions examine the impact of touch points on health and productivity norms.

## Questions for Addressing Cultural Touch Points

### Modeling

Do leaders and other opinion-makers model desired behavior or something else?

Who could serve as health and productivity role models?

How can the visibility of negative models be reduced?

### Rewards and Recognition

Are undesirable practices mistakenly being rewarded or recognized?

If someone behaved in desired ways, would their behavior be acknowledged?

### Confrontation

Are desirable practices mistakenly confronted?

Would there be push back from the culture if someone behaved in a healthy way?

### Recruitment and Selection

Do those seeking work know that this is a health-oriented culture?

Are new recruits open to and enthusiastic about achieving a healthier and more productive lifestyle?

### Orientation

What is the early experience of employees related to health and is this promoting the outcomes we are interested in?

Are new people informed about the health and productivity management vision and invited to become project champions?

### Training

Are people taught the skills they need to be good at healthy lifestyle practices?

Are people mistakenly being taught how to get by with an unhealthy lifestyle?

### Rites, Symbols and Rituals

Are there special events, daily/monthly activities and symbolic reminders that health is important?

Are undesirable practices such as overeating featured in special events?

### Communication

Are people given the information they need to make good decisions about their health?

Are people given regular feedback about personal health and health within their workgroup?

Do undesirable practices get all the attention?

## Relationship Development

Are work friendships and teams formed during healthy activities?

Are people given opportunities to help each other with health goals?

Are friendships and work relationships formed around unhealthy practices such as overeating, complaining and smoking?

## Resource Commitment

Do people have the time, equipment, food, child care and other resources needed to maintain their health?

Does the use of time, money and other resources demonsttate a commitment to supporting healthy choices?

Many health and productivity management programs have paid close attention to rewards and communication. Benefit packages are being reconfigured to incentivize completion of health risk appraisals. Various human performance and claims data are being merged to create a more complete picture of the current state of employee health and its impact on business outcomes. These strategies, however, utilize just a few of the cultural influences available.

In adjusting touch points:

- Use focus interviews with key decision-makers and a cross-section of employees to identify existing strengths and opportunities for improvement. Use feedback to plan the best ways to carry out change initiatives.
- Build on existing strengths by seeing what is positively influencing behavior.
- Touch points already function in a culture. Adjust the touch points. Don't replace them.
- Address enough touch points to tip the balance toward desired health behavior; using only one or two often produces insignificant change and unintended consequences.
- Executives and senior management have the most power to address touch points and should lead efforts to align them with positive practices.

**Peer Support** provides both emotional and instrumental assistance with lifestyle change and personal health improvement. Family, friends, coworkers and supervisors all can play valuable roles, and health and productivity initiatives should enhance the quality and quantity of peer support for healthy behaviors.

Effective support goes far beyond listening sympathetically. Training can increase the quality of peer support. The following skills aid in achieving health goals:

- **Establishing Trust and Openness.** Issues of confidentiality must be addressed with health issues. In addition, peers need to be able to broaden their relationships so that trust can form.
- **Setting Goals.** Lifestyle change is a process. Peers can help set stage-appropriate goals. They can help establish benchmarks along the path to successful change.
- **Eliminating Barriers.** Addressing health issues frequently requires resources. Proper equipment, time and appropriate skills are some of the most common resource needs. Peers can help develop a plan to address any lack of resources. For example, a co-worker can help cover child care needs or find ways to lower the cost of a fitness membership.
- **Locating Supportive Environments.** Supportive physical and social settings make change more likely. Peers can help find such supportive environments and develop strategies for avoiding unsupportive environments.
- **Working through Relapse.** Most life changes have setbacks. Peers can help get back on track, and also can develop

a plan for managing and avoiding high risk situations.

- **Celebrating Success.** Many efforts to address health go unacknowledged. Peers can cheer people on, and point out intrinsic health rewards.
- **Work Climate** is similar to overall work atmosphere or morale. Without a good work climate little can be accomplished personally or professionally. Three climate factors – a sense of community, a shared vision and a positive outlook – determine whether the culture can support individual and collective growth. Where these climate factors are noticeably absent – for example, when groups have low morale – little constructive change is possible.

Health and productivity initiatives can be organized to enhance the work climate. Social time can be structured into fitness and patient education classes. The health and productivity program can address central organizational challenges, which will foster a shared vision – i.e., with safety-sensitive companies like transportation or manufacturing addressing sleep and substance abuse. Health and productivity programs also can be revamped to emphasize the positive – for example, focusing on personal assets rather than risks.

## Culture-based Solutions Combine Individual Initiative with Support

In keeping with American individualism, past efforts to support employee health have focused almost exclusively on individual improvement. We have developed and refined tools to assess individual health risk and measure the impact of personal health on productivity. We've looked at individual readiness to change, and follow-up consists of tailored information and professional counseling. This fits well with employee expectations and is an extension of the medical model for individual diagnosis and treatment.

The predominantly individualistic model cannot deliver the results we want and need because:

- Health improvement programs that focus exclusively on individual change help only a small fraction of those in need. Low participation rates, program attrition and low success rates limit the impact. Limited behavior change generates little momentum within the culture.
- Without support, few individuals are able to maintain desired changes. When it comes to health and productivity, temporary results rarely count. In the case of healthy lifestyles, for example, it is a health hazard to try and eventually fail. "Yo-yo" changes lower self-esteem, raise stress and interfere with healthy metabolic systems. Low success rates and temporary change also undermine enthusiasm for health and productivity management.
- Individual interventions focus on changing unwanted behavior, but they do little to prevent new problem practices. An unsupportive and unmanaged culture draws people to new risks. Think, for example, of how the obesity epidemic has mushroomed. Real progress depends on stopping the flow towards undesirable practices and health risks. Keeping low-risk people at low risk is a vital health and productivity goal.

Culture change can address the limitations of individual-level intervention. Creating norms for positive health creates conditions for success. With a supportive culture, it is not necessary to sign-up to participate. When the environment is addressed and healthy norms exist, the benefits are widespread. A healthy and productive culture increases the likelihood of results that would be unimaginable with an effort that only addresses employees one at a time.

Individualism has the added drawback of undermining enthusiasm for cooperation and mutual support. In keeping with a rugged individualist perspective, we've mistakenly been trying to get individuals to persevere within unsupportive peer, household, workplace and community cultures. This approach is inadequate because humans and corporations depend on cooperative and integrated relationships. Cooperative action is a key component of the health and productivity management model.

The culture-based approach differs from approaches that focus exclusively on individual change. It supports individual initiative by creating environmental conditions for success. When we empower people to join in creating supportive cultural environments, the influence of social relationships will no longer be viewed as an obstacle to overcome, but rather a virtue to be utilized. HPM

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