



Wellness Leadership

Part of the Wellness Culture Coaching White
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**Wellness
Leadership**
Wellness Culture Coaching Toolkit



As might be expected in a society that places a high value on individual choice, American wellness programs are primarily aimed at motivating individuals to change their unhealthy practices. Such programs raise awareness and provide the guidance needed to set lifestyle improvement goals. Frequently, the programs include educational components that assist people in developing personal change strategies. Some of the more comprehensive offerings also provide follow-up counseling or coaching.

Wellness programs directed at individual motivation and personal changes have a huge impact. Most Americans (approximately 80 percent) attempt at least one lifestyle improvement goal annually. Most people are now aware of the dangers of health risks such as unhealthy eating, inadequate sleep and physical inactivity. Lifestyle has become a hot topic.

Unfortunately, the high interest in healthy lifestyles has not resulted in widespread practice of healthier behaviors. By some measures, such as the population's body fat and stress levels, the trends are going in the wrong direction. Health awareness and frequent lifestyle change attempts are not resulting in substantial and lasting behavior change. Fewer than 20 percent of those attempting to make a lifestyle change fully achieve their intended lifestyle for more than a couple of months.

Unsupportive environments make lasting and positive change unlikely. Most people can inconvenience themselves and go against the crowd for a while. Such heroic efforts are a tribute to willpower and creativity. However, even wellness heroes eventually want to turn their attention to other things. Without constant focus and diligence, their behavior slips back to old patterns that are supported by the culture.

Creating healthier physical and social environments is an important and relatively underdeveloped wellness strategy. Unfortunately, in America such attention to personal environments is considered a sign of weakness and a morally flawed approach. Real change is supposed to be driven by individual willpower and creativity. Support from others is seen as a sign of weakness, particularly among men. It is as if the things accomplished on one's own are much more valuable and permanent than what is achieved with help from others. Americans are supposed to achieve wellness despite a hostile environment where, for example, most readily available foods are unhealthy and inactivity is the norm.



The Role of Leaders in Creating Supportive Environments

When it comes to environmental change, American leaders are granted special powers and revered roles. The leadership role includes the right and the responsibility to shape the environment.

- Leaders are called upon to inspire and coordinate constructive change. Leaders are the instigators and organizers of change. They are responsible for follow-through and quality control.
- Leaders are gatekeepers. They allocate resources such as time, space and money.
- Leaders go beyond personal achievement by focusing on achieving group and organizational goals. Leaders work to create conditions that are conducive to success. They are accountable for the failure of the group or organization.

As can be seen in this list of rights and responsibilities, leaders could play important roles in creating environments that support wellness. For this reason, developing a broad base of leadership support is an important wellness strategy. Executives, managers, wellness committee members, union leaders and wellness enthusiasts of every stripe need to adopt wellness leadership roles. These people are well suited in terms of temperament, experience and authority to bring about environmental change.

Defining Wellness Leadership Roles

In 1999, the Human Resources Institute teamed up with the Wellness Councils of America to examine the role of organizational leaders in promoting wellness programs. Senior executives and middle managers working in companies with award-winning wellness programs were interviewed. Their personal testimonials revealed four primary leadership strategies:

1. **Sharing the wellness vision**, including how wellness is being defined, why it is important and how employees can participate in the wellness initiative.



2. **Serving as a role model** by participating in the wellness program and by adopting a healthy lifestyle.
3. **Aligning cultural touch points** which are formal and informal policies and procedures such as rewards, communication and training with wellness.
4. **Monitoring and celebrating success** so that individual and group-level wellness goals can be set and so that progress can be recognized.

Based on their findings, Drs. Judd Allen and David Hunnicutt wrote a white paper about wellness leadership.¹ In their effort to define wellness leadership, the authors developed an assessment. An updated version of this wellness leadership measure for business settings follows.

Leadership Support Indicator

The following questions assess the quality and quantity of leadership support for healthy lifestyles. To assess leadership support for wellness in your group, rate your level of agreement with the following statements using the following scale:

5 Strongly Agree, 4 Agree, 3 Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 2 Disagree, 1 Strongly Disagree

My immediate manager or supervisor...

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Explains why wellness is important to the organization. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Explains how employees can benefit from wellness. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Explains how employees can participate in the wellness program. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Demonstrates support for wellness through his or her personal lifestyle choices. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Participates in wellness activities. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Adopts policies and procedures that make it easy for people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyle practices such as physical activity, healthy eating and stress management. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Helps reduce barriers to achieving healthy lifestyle goals. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Recognizes people’s wellness achievements. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Sets wellness goals for our work group. |
| 1 2 3 4 5 | Celebrates the success of the groups in achieving shared wellness goals. |

How did your leaders do? If you are a manager or supervisor, how might your employees rate your leadership? Most people could find ways to improve their wellness leadership efforts.



Helping Leaders Share the Wellness Vision

Leaders can support wellness programs by explaining how the program works, why it is important and how people can participate. Leaders need to be able to communicate these basics in a way that inspires participation and lets people know that wellness is a priority.

Explaining Wellness Benefits

One of the great things about wellness is that it delivers a wide range of benefits. Leaders can learn how to call attention to wellness benefits and make a case that will resonate with their work group. For example, some people will not care whether money is saved on medical claims, but they may be very interested in how wellness can help heal a chronic condition. Such a broad range of benefits constitutes a full value proposition. Leaders do not have to rely on a narrow list of benefits to motivate others.

Developing the Wellness Story

Each organization has a unique history. Wellness needs to be rooted in the past and tied to the organization's hopes for its future. This story line may be clear in, for instance, a pharmaceutical company whose founder was dedicated to promoting health, but many organizations will have to dig deeper to find a connection between their history and wellness. For example, an organization could further its long-standing commitment to being a good corporate citizen by supporting the wellness of employees and their families. Wellness professionals can assist leaders in understanding and articulating the organization's wellness story. The leaders should be able to explain this organizational wellness story to others.

Clarifying Wellness Goals

Wellness concerns merging the emotional, spiritual, social, economic and physical aspects of life into a coherent and vital whole. Whereas this definition may be clear to wellness champions, many employees will be better satisfied with a more concrete and specific definition. To this end, leaders can explain wellness in terms of health behavior and lifestyle goals. The leader can help clarify the wellness program vision by explaining



that the organization is going to support people in their efforts to achieve healthy lifestyle practices such as getting fit.

Granting Permission to Participate

Leaders are gatekeepers in many settings. They help determine what information gets to people and how that information is presented. They also help determine which activities are legitimate at the workplace. The manager can use his or her gatekeeper role to advance the wellness initiative. Managers can:

- Explain worksite wellness programs and how they can be accessed. Sometimes this function is as simple as posting a list of upcoming wellness activities. Managers should also know who to contact for further information.
- Announce their support for participating in wellness programs. Sometimes this support will include a work break or plans for flexible work schedules.
- Remind employees about wellness activities that require broad participation. Such reminders are often needed to increase participation in personal health assessments, culture surveys and wellness program needs and interests surveys.

Addressing Concerns about Wellness

Some employees have concerns about the wellness program. For example, employees may object to the organization getting involved in their life outside of work. Other employees might be fearful that the organization will force them to make lifestyle changes against their will. Wellness leaders are in a good position to address such concerns. They can set a positive tone for the wellness program and clarify how it works. For example, they might explain that a guiding principle of the wellness program is to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Wellness professionals can assist leaders in developing effective responses to common employee concerns.



Helping Leaders Serve as Effective Role Models

Leaders should develop strategies for “walking the talk.” This might include discussing their personal lifestyle strengths and their lifestyle-improvement goals. Leaders should participate in such core wellness program activities as completing personal health assessments and working with a health coach. At a minimum, leaders should look for ways to lower the visibility of any unhealthy practices. For example, it is not helpful to brag about working long hours.

Wellness professionals can help each leader develop a personal plan for being a better role model. Managers can be first on the list to receive health coaching. Leaders can receive personal invitations to wellness activities and be given tours of available wellness resources, such as fitness facilities. Special efforts can be made to include wellness activities in management training and other management functions.

Helping Leaders Align Cultural Touch Points

Cultural touch points are formal and informal mechanisms for establishing and maintaining behavior. Most organizations have policies, procedures and programs that influence health behavior. Smoking policies are among the most obvious examples. Equally powerful are the unwritten and informal activities that influence behavior. The coffee break is an example of such an informal activity. The following 10 primary and overlapping touch points shape the culture. They must be understood and adjusted to create and sustain desired culture change.

Cultural Touch Points

Wellness Role Models

Leaders have an important role modeling function, but wellness role models should include people who do not have leadership roles. A wellness initiative needs role models at all levels within the organization. One goal is to increase the visibility of the positive practices of employees. The wellness role modeling function is especially important with those employees who are most respected. Another goal is to reduce the modeling of unhealthy practices.



Rewards and Recognition

When it comes to rewards, financial incentives often receive the most attention. Rewards can also come in the form of praise, increased autonomy, access to resources, first choice on job responsibilities and promotion. In a wellness culture, rewards for unhealthy practices are reduced or eliminated. For example, smokers should not get work breaks that are unavailable to non-smokers. Overwork should not be the path to promotion. Leaders must be careful to reward healthy practices and not mistakenly reward unhealthy practices. Leaders can realign the contingencies of rewards. For example, a performance evaluation could accommodate information about employees' approach to maintaining a healthy mix of work, rest and play.

Pushback

We often think about how we will stop people from doing the wrong thing. Drunk driving laws and speeding laws are examples of this. Restrictive smoking policies are another example of pushing back against unhealthy practices. Leaders also need to think about how to stop unintended pushback against healthy practices. Would an employee taking a break to meditate be discouraged or mocked by his or her manager or coworkers? Pushback can be as simple as body language or an expression of concern.

Recruitment and Selection

Part of changing a culture is ensuring that new members are amenable to the new culture. Is the work group known as being a good place for health-oriented people? At a minimum, new hires should be open to pursuing positive practices.

First Impressions and Orientation

New members' first impressions stick with them. Formal orientation could include information about policies and activities that support employees' health. Ideally, the first day or days of employment would include a conversation about healthy lifestyles and the wellness initiative.



Learning and Training

Living a healthy lifestyle takes a lot of knowledge and skill. Such learning and training comes from a variety of sources including classroom instruction, online course work and personal instruction. Are employees taught the skills they need to adopt positive practices? This is particularly important in those areas in which the culture is having the most trouble. For example, there are many names for sugar on food packaging. To eat healthier, someone needs to be able to translate those cryptic labels. Also, informal training associated with unhealthy practices, such as working through the lunch break, may need to be reduced.

Communication

Information about wellness is constantly being updated by a steady flow of research. There is also a steady flow of new information about community and worksite wellness programs. Are people getting the information they need to live a healthy lifestyle? Feedback on personal health assessments can lead to better health goals. Coaching and health information Web sites also provide helpful information. Employees could also benefit from information about the achievement of wellness goals set by their work group.

Traditions and Symbols

Certain acts carry special meaning in a culture. Such traditions and symbols should be aligned with wellness. Some senior leaders, for example, have shown their support by moving their designated parking spot away from the front entrance. A daily tradition such as a stretch break can be a powerful statement in support of wellness. Other traditions could take place annually, such as participation in community fitness events. The great thing about such symbolic acts is that they explicitly show that health is genuinely valued in the work culture.



Relationship Development

People tend to stick with activities that enhance the quantity and quality of their relationships. Are employees forming their friendships and work relationships around healthy activities? Or are they forming their relationships around unhealthy foods and activities? Family, friends and housemates need to be considered, too. They play important roles in a wellness culture.

Resource Commitment

The use of time, space and money makes a powerful statement about wellness. Ideally, the healthy choices should be the most affordable, convenient and most attractive alternatives. Do employees have the time, space, equipment and other resources needed to pursue positive practices? Proper resources can eliminate barriers and show that health is a priority in the workplace.

Most leaders already use cultural influences to support effective work practices. Leaders can play an important role in aligning cultural touch points with wellness. They can engage employees in conversations about making adjustments in these cultural touch points. The idea is to tip the balance of influence to support the creation of healthier cultural norms.

Wellness programs can support the realignment of cultural touch points by:

- Identifying cultural touch point strengths and opportunities for improvement.
- Working with organizational leaders to establish wellness-friendly policies and procedures.
- Suggesting best practices from other work groups or other organizations.

Helping Leaders Monitor and Celebrate Success

Leaders are in a position to keep track of progress and to acknowledge employees' wellness efforts. Leaders can see progress as it happens. Their familiarity with employees makes it possible to choose rewards that are most meaningful. For example, one employee might enjoy public celebration while another would prefer quiet acknowledgment.



Leaders can work with both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Healthy lifestyles generate their own intrinsic rewards associated with health, energy and personal performance. Leaders can call attention to these intrinsic rewards. Leaders can also ensure that employees receive praise, compensation and whatever other extrinsic rewards are available.

Closing the Leadership Feedback Loop

As the old management adage goes, “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” Information drives effective leadership priorities. Although many wellness programs collect information about the effectiveness of their efforts, middle managers and other wellness leaders are rarely given aggregate information about their work group’s performance. Leaders need timely information to keep their group’s wellness efforts on track. Fortunately, computers and the Internet now make compiling aggregate and anonymous information for each work group relatively straightforward.

One approach is to organize information into a leadership dashboard of key wellness indicators. These indicators make it possible to set work group goals and to track progress. Three broad categories of wellness information can help drive management efforts: (1) performance data, (2) programmatic data, and (3) cultural data.

The Wellness Leadership Dashboard

Performance data measures include health behavior, lifestyle-change rates, and economic outcomes. Performance measures are easily quantified bottom-line measures of success. Measures of smoking, physical activity and healthy eating would show up in the dashboard indicator for performance.

Programmatic data measures include program participation rates, participant satisfaction, program interests and perceived barriers to participation. From the programmatic dashboard, for example, it would be possible to determine what percentage of eligible employees had completed the personal health assessment.

Cultural data measures include employee perceptions of the work culture and environment. Such assessments help determine whether the healthy choice has become



the easiest choice. Employees would, for example, be asked about their level of agreement that it is normal to remain at home when sick.

A wellness leadership dashboard helps managers and other wellness leaders see progress at the work group level. Such progress can be recognized by the wellness program and the organization. One university, for example, provides a cash reward to work groups that achieve their group wellness goals. The department chair can also find ways to honor the success that the group is achieving. This may be as simple as thanking those who contributed to the effort.

Engaging Managers and Peer Leaders in Wellness Leadership

Wellness professionals must reach out to build a diverse group of wellness leaders. Ideally, wellness leaders will be among the most capable, thoughtful and respected members of the organization. The goal is to attract people who are already viewed as peer leaders. The best wellness leaders have the enthusiasm, creativity, contacts and experience to get things done.

Many of the top wellness leadership prospects will be drawn to the many benefits of wellness. Wellness is often promoted as a way to control health-care costs. Although return on investment is important, many potential wellness leaders find other healthy lifestyle benefits to be of equal importance. As one executive put it, “I like wellness because it can save lives and save money.” Showcase the many benefits of wellness leadership:

- A wellness leader gains the satisfaction of helping people in meaningful ways. The act of helping raises the self-esteem of those offering support.
- When someone supports healthy lifestyles in a group or organization, he or she creates a more supportive cultural environment for his or her own positive lifestyle practices. For some, wellness leadership is a matter of self-preservation.
- Healthy people are more productive. Working sick is not a good option in demanding jobs. We depend on a high level of performance among our peers to carry the workload.
- Wellness leadership provides an opportunity to address some of the most pressing health concerns facing our businesses, our communities and the nation.



The Wellness Leadership Tool Kit

The Human Resources Institute has developed a number of resources to promote wellness leadership.

- The Wellness Leadership movie features leadership interviews.²
- Wellness Leadership Training teaches managers, wellness committees and other wellness champions how to foster a wellness culture within a work group.
- The Wellness Leadership Dashboard provides leaders with feedback about wellness within their work groups.
- The book *Wellness Leadership* features assessments, research, commentary and examples related to supporting a wellness culture within a work group.³
- Wellness Culture Coaching is a network of wellness professionals who have been trained to provide wellness leadership resources. Wellness Culture Coaches are also empowered to offer culture change resources dedicated to increasing the quality and quantity of peer support and household support for wellness.

The Future of Wellness Leadership

Developing wellness leaders is beginning to gain popularity in wellness program design. A decade of testing and resource development is making the approach more widely available. There is a growing awareness that leaders can play a central role in effective wellness programs. However, this is a big departure from decades of wellness program designs that focused exclusively on individual outreach and education. The new model combines support for individual change with supportive environments. Wellness programs must add culture change strategies whereby healthy behavior becomes “the way we do things around here.” Achieving such a wellness culture makes it far more likely that employees will not adopt new unhealthy practices. A wellness culture also makes it more likely that employees will succeed in achieving and maintaining their personal health improvement goals. Leaders at all levels have a responsibility for shaping the workplace culture. That responsibility includes fostering a workplace culture that supports employee health and safety.



Leaders can learn to support wellness by sharing the wellness vision, serving as effective wellness role models, aligning cultural touch points with healthy lifestyle practices, and monitoring and celebrating success. These core wellness leadership skills broaden the ownership of the wellness initiative. Wellness leadership brings more than good cheer to the workplace. It addresses the underlying conditions that support or fail to support employee well-being.

Six Things to Consider When Developing Wellness Leadership

1. Broaden the appeal. Be careful not to overstate the financial benefits of healthy lifestyles as the savings could easily disappear in a dysfunctional and rapidly changing medical care system. Wellness has delivered a good financial return on investment. It also delivers other important benefits to the business, such as improved corporate image and strengthened teamwork, and benefits to individuals, such as enhanced personal performance, speedier recovery from illness and opportunities to help others. Don't sell wellness short. People may be inspired by different wellness benefits.

2. Give enthusiasts leadership roles. There is a tendency to view senior management as synonymous with leadership. These people are important, but they are often unavailable, overcommitted, and out of touch with many work groups. Wellness leadership is needed throughout the organization. Some people still need convincing about wellness, but many are already on board. Find ways for wellness enthusiasts to express their support. All enthusiasts are good candidates for wellness leadership roles.

3. Wellness benefits depend on healthy lifestyles and supportive environments. The best results can be achieved by helping people to maintain their healthy practices. A second, and more challenging approach, is to help people change unhealthy behavior. It is unlikely that either of these two strategies will work in unsupportive physical and social environments. Pay special attention to making healthy choices the easier and more enjoyable choices.

4. Leaders know a lot about behavior. Their jobs depend on getting things done. They are unlikely to be impressed by the wellness programs that emphasize initial motivation and information, but fall short on follow-through. Engage leaders in creating conditions for success.

5. Adopt a positive approach. Pointing fingers at unhealthy people and penalizing employees for unhealthy practices is likely to have a highly negative impact on morale and teamwork. Drop negative language such as health risks. Focus instead on individual and collective strengths. It is our strengths and not our weaknesses that help us to move forward. Emphasize mutual support, family support and community support. Wellness is something we can do together. Our most important heroes should be people who accomplished their goals with others.

6. Make it possible for leaders to set group goals. Managers and other wellness leaders need access to useful, up-to-date information about their work group. A leadership dashboard makes managing for wellness possible. Performance, programmatic and cultural data should be organized so that leaders can act from a sound information base.



About Judd Allen, Ph.D.

Judd Allen earned his Ph.D. in Community Psychology from New York University. He is author of *Wellness Leadership*, *Bringing Wellness Home*, *Kitchen Table Talks for Wellness*, and *Healthy Habits, Helpful Friends*. Dr. Allen is also president of the Human Resources Institute and serves as an editor of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* and on the board of directors of the National Wellness Institute. Further information about his work is available at www.healthyculture.com.

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