

Keys to the Success & Failure of Workplace Wellness Programs



It's disappointing that more employers haven't caught onto the many documented benefits'for both employers and workers'of workplace wellness programs, including:

- Improved worker health
- Increased productivity
- Reduced costs for employers, including costs related to workers' comp
- Quicker returns to work after an injury or illness.

But your wellness program will only reap the above benefits if you take certain steps to ensure its success'and avoid others that could lead to its failure.

Strong Program Leader Is a Must

For example, the leader of the wellness program, who's often a safety professional, can have a big impact on the program's success. According to Health Enhancement Systems, which creates wellness challenges and materials for companies and organizations, great wellness program leaders have seven traits:

1. **Resilience.** The top wellness leaders have often endured numerous restructurings, new reporting lines and endless justification exercises. Through it all, they've maintained a sense of mission'an unfailing belief in their purpose.
2. **Assertiveness.** The most successful wellness programs almost always have a leader who's an unflinching champion for the cause, pushing forward against heavy odds and building on each success.
3. **Ego drive.** The desire to persuade'whether it's helping someone change a behavior or influencing a VP's decision about expanding a program'is universal among top leaders.
4. **Risk taking.** Good leaders try things that haven't been done before. These successful risk takers look for calculated chances, based on their own experience and knowledge as well as that of other colleagues in wellness and other fields.
5. **Innovation.** Top leaders are always on the lookout for good ideas, then

modify and build on them for even greater success.

6. **Urgency.** The difference between great leaders and good managers is often the sense of urgency leaders express and instill in their team.
7. **Empathy.** The first six traits could describe a great leader in almost any field. What separates exceptional wellness program leaders from others is their ability to feel for others. They care about people as people, not just challenges, tools or a means to an end.

Use Carrots, Not Sticks

One thing you should *avoid* doing is imposing a penalty on workers who choose not to participate in the wellness program or don't achieve certain results. On the other hand, rewarding workers who do participate or who, say, exercise a certain amount of time per week or lose a certain amount of weight can be very successful.

In general, carrots are better motivators than sticks, as Penn State recently learned.

As reported in the *New York Times*, due to strong objections by faculty members, the university decided to suspend part of a new employee wellness program that imposed a \$100 monthly noncompliance fee on employees who refused to fill out an online questionnaire.

Staff members argued that the questionnaire, which asked for many intimate details about their lives, invaded their privacy and objected to the punitive nature of the fine.

Other Wellness Resources

The OHS Insider has many resources on workplace wellness programs, including:

- Five case studies of employers who implemented wellness programs and reaped many benefits from them
- Why OHS and wellness programs should work together (and a checklist to help you integrate these programs)
- Wellness programs and profitability
- Wellness programs customized by job
- Coordination between safety and HR on wellness programs.