Is Corporate Wellness Really Worth It?

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There are many positive things one can say about corporate wellness programs aimed at creating a healthy environment for employees. Much has been written about the profound results companies have found through their wellness programs. However, what most reports fail to discuss is the sustainability of these programs. And while employee well-being is important, many employers are going about things the wrong way.

The way many companies approach wellness has unfortunately become like a game of “Whack-a-Mole” — they implement a wellness incentive program to improve employee health, but meanwhile, three other moles have popped up elsewhere in the forms of decreased morale, reduced productivity and declined engagement. To avoid becoming caught in this endless cycle, companies should shift their focus from short-term behavioral changes to addressing overall well-being.

Shift from Health to Well-Being

Well-being is not limited to just physical health and wellness. In fact, focusing on any one thing in isolation leads to frustration. According to recent research from the Gallup Organization, well-being is made up of five essential elements:

1. Career well-being — how one occupies his or her time or likes what he or she does every day.
2. Social well-being — having strong relationships and love in one’s life.
3. Financial well-being — effectively managing one’s economic life.

4. Physical well-being — having good health and enough energy to accomplish things each day.
5. Community well-being — having a sense of engagement with the area in which one lives.

How these elements interact determines overall well-being and quality of life. If an employer focuses too much in one area but ignores others, the wellness program is more likely to become unsustainable.

Of all the elements, Gallup found career well-being to be the most important because it has the greatest impact. In fact, reduced career well-being and engagement has been linked to increased workplace injuries, declined mental health, and even increased cholesterol and triglyceride levels. If employees already do not trust management, do not have strong relationships with their coworkers, do not get to leverage their strengths, have too much on their plate, have had wages and benefits cut, or anything else that reduces engagement and career well-being, then implementing a wellness program that focuses on specific health behaviors will likely fail.

Doctors already recognize the importance of employee well-being. Consider these three questions:

1. Would you describe your work as monotonous?
2. How satisfied are you with your job?
3. How tense or anxious have you been in the past week?

Most people think these questions are assessing stress or job satisfaction. In fact, these questions are part of a comprehensive back pain assessment used by doctors in New Zealand to predict with 83 percent accuracy who will be out of work more than 30 days due to low back pain. Of course, traditional medical questions are also part of the assessment, but job satisfaction and engagement play a significant role.

Shift from Participation to Engagement

Most companies focus on behavior modification (e.g., smoking, physical activity, nutrition) and use incentives to get employees to comply with the desired behaviors. This is where organizations become stuck. They get participation but not engagement.

The Gallup Organization defines engagement as people who work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. As a result, they drive innovation and move the organization toward its goals and vision. Lack of engagement costs American businesses more than $370 billion per year in lost productivity, and has been associated with increased injury rates, declining mental health and decreased well-being.

Even programs that achieve 80 to 90 percent participation results may not have engagement. When surveying or interviewing employees in these organizations,

many will indicate they are simply “going through the motions” in order to get the incentive. Even worse, many will resent the program and feel they are forced to participate.

Research shows engagement occurs when employees know what is expected of them, feel valued, are able to leverage their strengths, are cognitively stimulated and have quality relationships at work. Moving beyond wellness programs to create a culture that fosters engagement will be more effective in the long run by improving overall well-being, safety and the profitability of organizations.

What Really Motivates People?

Research consistently shows long-term change must come from within a person (i.e., intrinsic motivation). Change efforts based on extrinsic motivation (i.e., carrots and sticks) typically fail in the long run and can reduce intrinsic motivation. At best, the result is short-term behavior compliance.

Behaviors are the observable acts based on a person’s thinking. Therefore, intrinsic motivation and effective change start from a shift in thinking. It is not really possible to motivate another person; the desire can only come from within a person. If employees do not feel valued, they will perceive any wellness program as a manipulation and will resist change.

Shift from Fixing to Supporting

Neuroscience research shows the brain is literally hard-wired to resist change. It behaves like a two-year old and pushes back when told what to do. When an individual is pushed to change, the brain sends out powerful signals that something is wrong, and these signals readily overpower any rational thought. However, when people are supported and able work out their own solutions, the brain releases a rush of neurotransmitters like adrenaline.

Companies are most successful when they support employees in working towards what matters to them by providing a culture and environment that supports all areas of well-being.

A Different & Effective Approach to Wellness

Successful wellness programs are a natural extension of the company culture where employees truly feel valued and career well-being is high. Without a culture of mutual trust and respect, wellness programs and incentives are perceived as another way to manipulate employees.

In fact, working to increase engagement does far more for well-being in the long term than implementing a weight management or smoking cessation program.

Getting Started the Right Way

First, companies need to measure their culture to understand current employee

attitudes and values, along with their perceptions of leadership, support and company norms. These underlying attitudes are like an elephant in the room; they exist whether they are measured or not. Ignoring them won't make them go away. Instead, identifying them provides opportunity to improve. Any well-being initiative should be based on the unique needs and values of employees, not an idea another company had that was successful.

Rather than implementing a "wellness program," implement a new "well-being benefit" of employment that employees help to create. The benefit should be based off the culture survey and address all areas of well-being. Well-being teams or task forces should be created to ensure this is an employee-driven benefit, not a human resources or leadership initiative to cut healthcare costs.

The team should create a three- to five-year strategic plan to improve each area of well-being. Once the long-term vision for employee well-being is established, create a detailed operating plan for the next 12 months that will serve as a blueprint for where to start. For many companies, their well-being plan starts with the fundamentals of rebuilding trust, improving communication and other elements that will improve career well-being.

When companies focus on all five elements of well-being and create a culture that honors the unique needs of their employees, they will have less of a need to use incentives. The improved culture will allow them to harness the intrinsic healthful desires of their employees to improve well-being.

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