



5 Tips to Maximize Employee Engagement in Your Wellness Strategy

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After much deliberation, several committee meetings, and long collaboration with a trusted vendor partner (or two), you have introduced a brand new employee wellness strategy complete with a host of attractive programs, incentives, and opportunities. You roll out the strategy with creative messaging, carefully thought-out carrots, and high expectations.

You already know the key to success is employee participation. The workforce must be engaged in the programs; and for your initiative to be successful, they have to believe in the overall strategy. You’ve worked hard to build and launch this strategy in a way that will maximize employee involvement. Maybe you have even generously offered to financially reward them for participating in some key activities like completing a health-risk assessment prior to open enrollment.

Your well-meant goal is ultimately to create a healthier, more competitive workforce. You also embarked on this strategy because you believe it’s the right thing to do.

Well done. It’s no small feat to create and launch a full-blown corporate wellness strategy.

But Why Isn't Anyone Participating?

So, how come your employees—the ones you really need to reach with the wellness services—aren’t participating? Why aren’t you seeing results? Why are the run-at-lunchers and bike-to-workers the only ones racking up the wellness points? Why isn’t all of that attractive programming, financial generosity, and healthier-life potential enough to bring in the masses?

Before you throw in the towel and call off this whole wellness program thing, take heart. You and all of your employee engagement woes are in good company. The 15th Annual National Business Group on Health/Towers Watson Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care found that nearly two-thirds of employers say employees’ poor health habits are the biggest challenge to managing health care costs, and almost 60% point to low employee engagement as the greatest obstacle to initiating healthful change.

Let’s face it. Your workforce is busy—distracted, even. There’s a good chance that, because of some higher-level strategic business moves, they are trying to do more with fewer resources than they had a few years ago. You’ve asked them to step it up, directly or otherwise, and they’re doing the best they can to perform up to expectations in their work environment.

Many of your employees also have competing demands in their personal lives that make it hard for them to perform at a top level. They may have elder-care responsibilities, their own health challenges with which to contend, and child care and transportation to extracurriculars for their kids that are weighing on their schedules. Your employees have lives, sometimes very complicated ones, outside the walls of your business.

Things are tough at work and at home—busy, stressful, demanding, and nonstop.

And now, in addition to your expectations for your employees’ performance in their day jobs, and the demands placed on them in their personal lives, you’ve told them that they are expected to engage in the myriad wellness offerings you’ve laid at their feet.

You hear, “The door is open. Come in, participate, and begin leading healthier lives.”

They hear, “While you’re working diligently to meet your daily or monthly quota, kindly find a way to improve your health because you’re costing us all a lot of money when you don’t exercise/eat right/manage your stress.”

Understand the Variables in Developing a Wellness Culture

Figuring out what works in employee wellness strategy is no small task. Among the variables you may be juggling are the following:

- Each workforce and worksite is different. You no doubt have some quirks about your organization that demand very creative thinking focused on the programs you offer as well as your communication strategy for rolling out those niche services. No matter how well you understand your business, it’s going to take some time to gain a thorough understanding of the psyche of your workforce, particularly as it relates to their willingness to at least tolerate, if not appreciate, a message of well-being from their employer.
- Wellness vendors come in all shapes and sizes, with equally diverse levels of experience. Aligning your organization with vendors who can support your goals, and who have the expertise to be the subject-matter experts for you, is crucial.
- You still have a business to run. As much fun as it might sound to get in a workout, connect with colleagues over a healthy lunch, and participate in an afternoon stress-resilience workshop, you too have significant expectations placed on you to meet the operational goals for your organization. Employee wellness might feel like the part of your job you complete between 10:00pm and midnight.
- Employee turnover can make it hard to get traction around wellness initiatives. If you have to keep reintroducing the program components to new employees, the heart of the program has very little chance of sinking in. You may struggle to truly establish a healthy workplace culture if you can’t really get past step 1 of introducing the program.
- Your existing worksite culture has a life (and a self-preserving ego) all its own. It will be an uphill battle to make the continuous shift needed from your existing organizational culture to one that maintains the soul of your business with a message of well-being throughout. It is meaningful work, and it requires persistence.

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Building a healthy culture is hard work; it is not for the faint of heart. If you're serious about improving the health of your workforce, read on to learn some creative ways to maximize employee engagement.

Tip 1: Take a 360° view of your offerings. How many of your services are geared toward the “already sick” versus those for the “apparently healthy”?

Money spent in health care follows the Pareto principle, just like many other economic phenomena. Close to 80% of health care dollars are used by 20% of the population. While it's true that some of the 20% include those with diseases like cancer and ALS that cannot be reversed by choosing more fruits and veggies or engaging in more physical activity, it is also true that a substantial portion of the sickest 20% are individuals who have chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes, and those who are obese, use tobacco, or any combination of the above.

The unfortunate truth about many people with chronic disease is that, although they desperately need education and other resources to start making healthier choices, the amount of money we need to spend to start turning their health tide is significantly higher than what we could spend on keeping the already healthy quite well.

Examine your strategy. Are you spending a disproportionate amount of your resources trying to make the sick well? Or have you struck a healthy balance between providing case/care management opportunities (and incentivizing consistent participation in those programs) for those with chronic conditions as well as offering a variety of education- and behavior-based initiatives that support those who desire to maintain their good health?

Dr. Dee Eddington, Director of the University of Michigan Health Research Center, highlights three key principles in his book *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy* that he believes should guide a workplace wellness strategy:

- Don't get worse.
- Keep healthy employees healthy.
- Create a culture of health.

Realize that your employees who are living with chronic illnesses may also be suffering from depression. And while the research is unclear about which comes first (the depression or the chronic illness), the fact is that depression can make an already difficult health situation worse. In addition to the concerns about how depression manifests and how blinding the feelings of isolation and hopelessness can be, there is the underlying issue that depression can make it even harder for someone with chronic illness to maintain medication compliance. Furthermore, it can be all but impossible to nudge positive behavior change in someone who is both chronically ill and depressed.

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Be aware of your messaging and your techniques to drive healthy choices throughout each/all of your initiatives. Understand that those opportunities geared toward the employees who are chronically ill may require a different message than those offerings designed for the already healthy employees.

Tip #2: Weigh the value of your health risk assessment (HRA).

Search the Web for health risk assessments and you'll find all the evidence you need that your program must include an HRA. Proponents say it's a great way to get aggregate health data on your employees to help you target your wellness programs toward the areas that are most needed in your business. If you have multiple campuses, you can target by location so that you're not wasting money on programs that don't speak to your audiences.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? I want a worksite wellness tool that's going to help me deliver the right tools to my employees. In fact, I want it badly enough that I'm willing to pay good money for it. I'll pay for the aggregate reporting, thank you very much. And then I'll use that to direct my wellness champions on the big picture for our business.

It does sound good, but it's not particularly necessary, and you may be able to direct your money and time elsewhere into more meaningful strategies to help shift your business culture. Unfortunately, using HRAs to build your program may present more problems than solutions.

According to Andrew Sykes, Chairman of Health at Work, HRAs present these pitfalls for employers:

- Unless you are able to generate better than 80% participation in the HRA, there's a good chance that your outcome data is a misrepresentation of the health of your workforce.
- Individual desires for optimal health get in the way of people filling out their HRA truthfully. So even if you get stellar HRA participation, the result may still be skewed.
- Further complicating the HRA picture is data that indicates the issuing organization can contribute to how an HRA will be completed by participants.

There's little chance that you'll be surprised about data on your HRA aggregate reports. You probably have a workforce that is overweight. They probably show a lot of heart disease with a focus on high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Many of your employees are likely to be diabetics. About 20% of your employees are probably still using tobacco, and the majority of them will report feeling moderate to significant amounts of stress.

If you follow the logic that the HRA data may not be all that compelling, you may be thinking, "What about the value of using the HRA as an engagement tool? Won't we draw in more people who will be surprised by their individual HRA reports about their health?"

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It's true, for some of your employees, there will be that shock value of completing the HRA, learning they are at risk, and seeking information and tools to improve their health. However, the question that must be wrestled with is, do you need the HRA to kick-start individuals to improve their health, or are there other (lower-cost) ways to invite participation in your initiatives? If you're counting on your HRA as a key employee engagement tool, you may want to rethink that position.

As you think about the value of your HRA, consider all elements that contribute to or take away from that value equation.

- What is the raw cost from your vendor for the tool, the staff, the reporting, the communication plan, etc.?
- How much does it cost your business for the employee(s) who is (are) engaged with the vendor on the rollout and on the back-end reporting/strategy-building sessions?
- What is the business cost for your employees to actually take the HRA if they are allowed to do so on work time?
- What might the cost be for the employees who feel like you are now Big Brother, watching their every health move?
- What is the potential value for reliable outcome data received from the vendor following a complete HRA rollout?
- What is the value of the HRA spurring the changes you expect in the health of your workforce? Or what are the costs if the HRA does not spur the change you want to see in the health of your workforce?

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Can you afford to offer an HRA as a primary tool in your organization's wellness strategy? Maybe the answer is yes, but it's important that you make a well-informed decision about this sometimes high-cost/low-value tool.

Tip #3: Don't let your penchant for a demonstrated return on investment (ROI) overshadow your original big-picture goals.

Capturing true ROI in employee wellness is complicated and very hard to do. Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something. Sometimes, we find that an organization's constant push, push, push for ROI and measuring, and data, and outcomes, and on and on, can negatively impact what they ultimately want to accomplish.

Individual health behavior change is messy; it doesn't always show its success with nice, neat numbers. There is quite a bit about personal health wrapped up in our psyche. And, let's face it, you can't really measure changes in psyche and directly tie them back to individual or group health. So before you start throwing out/in this program or that strategy because you've been convinced about how it might influence the ROI for your program, think twice about your employee wellness goals for the company.

Let me be clear here: It is still important to assess program effectiveness, but assessing effectiveness and demonstrating ROI can be two very different things. Consider how you might capture program effectiveness with the tools that are already available to you.

- Lowering health insurance costs: Can you see your health care cost trends year over year? Can you get aggregate claims data on your policy if you have a third-party payer? What does that information tell you about the health of your workforce?
- Improving productivity: Are established production/quota/service goals being met or exceeded?
- Decreasing absenteeism: Are program participants less likely to be absent than your non-program participants?

Before you engage the services of a highly sophisticated (and highly expensive) third party to scrub your stats, think about the information at your disposal and determine whether you can get a sense about the value of your investment all on your own.

Tip #4: Get creative about blending what employees tell you they want and what your program results tell you they really need.

The challenge is this: You have a dedicated amount of money you can spend on employee wellness, and you need to judiciously use that money on the right blend of sick-care and well-care programming. You need some money for messaging, rewards, and data gathering. Yet, if you don't give your employees what they want, they are less likely to be engaged in the program. If they aren't engaged, your program doesn't meet its goals.

You have to find a way to strike the delicate balance between what you need to accomplish and what your employees want. When you find that sweet spot, employees will begin to provide a driving force for your efforts.

Since the dawn of NBC's Biggest Loser television show, where obese contestants go through extreme challenges to compete for weight loss, we've seen versions of this reality game show crop up in our corporate client settings. Weight-loss strategies a la Biggest Loser are not well aligned with what practitioners would recommend, but the public, hungry for the next gimmick in weight loss, has grasped onto this Hollywood concept.

If you've found that your group wants and responds well to Biggest Loser-style challenges, it might be worth giving into those employee-driven initiatives. Consider whether you can leverage the enthusiasm around such a program to your advantage. By collaborating with the program's developers, you may be able to incentivize behaviors and affect outcomes.



Find a way to balance the healthy food versus comfort food equation by keeping some of the traditional favorites, but still making it easy for your employees to make healthy choices. Subsidize the cost of healthier foods. Put the turkey sub with lettuce, tomato, and other veggies on whole wheat in front of the cheeseburger. Double the cost of fries and give an alternative to the traditional side item.

Consider flexible schedules for your workforce. Before you jump to the knee-jerk “no” response because you think that a flexible-schedule policy will cost you too much money, or too much time, take a moment to read this blog that challenges five commonly held assumptions about work-life flexibility.

You’re working toward improved employee engagement. Balancing what they need with what they want may create a win-win for you, and for them.

Tip #5: Participate in the wellness-culture-building activities you support for your workforce.

It’s simply not enough for you to issue a letter to your employees announcing the company’s wellness program launch. It doesn’t matter how many creative ways you say you want them to feel comfortable participating. It won’t make enough of an impact if you remind them in writing about the incentives available for them when they participate.

You have to do the hard work, too.

You have to get out there in front of your employees and participate. They need to see you in line for your health screening, they need to be on the treadmill next to you at the company fitness center, and they need to be in line right behind you when you choose the veggie burger, grilled sweet potato fries, and water. They need to witness you taking your own suggestions by observing your walking meetings, and by seeing you come out of the stairwell rather than the elevator.

Creating an engaging wellness strategy that fosters employee buy-in is not a “do as I say, not as I do” proposition. I know it seems like the top-down communication should be enough, but it isn’t. You will have to lead by example in order for employees to believe that their work culture actually accepts them making healthy choices.

If, as this blog notes, you’re done “finessing health insurance” as a cost-controlling measure, you will have to turn to employee wellness as a new strategy. Just remember to keep the above tips in mind to help maximize employee engagement in your initiative. Fostering engagement isn’t easy because you are competing with other compelling issues that employees are juggling. Getting their attention is tricky, but doing it with a positive message that is reinforced with leadership in action is an even greater challenge. Can it be done? Absolutely, but you will have to be persistent, creative, and flexible.

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