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B. Nick DiGrino
Iowa State University

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EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: CORPORATE WELLNESS

BY

DR. B. NICK DIGRINO, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND COORDINATOR

LEISURE STUDIES
202 BEYER HALL
IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
AMES, IOWA 50011

ABSTRACT

The dimensions of individual wellness was applied to the corporate setting. Benefits to the individual as well as the organization were identified. Preventative measures were recommended as an alternative to rapidly expanding medical intervention. The importance of removing drudgery from the wellness related lifestyle through recreation was emphasized.

EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: CORPORATE WELLNESS

In an era when mediocrity is rapidly becoming the norm in so many of our institutions, modern business and industry must successfully cope with changing values in the workplace while developing a mentality among their employees that invites creativity, rewards risk takers, and instills pride in a job well done. The companies that are successfully doing this are realizing that healthy return on investment is a natural by-product.

The private-for-profit organization exists primarily to generate return on resources. Companies that can be classified as truly healthy, usually are characterized by a profitable history and a general atmosphere of cautious optimism. Monthly financial statements aren't nearly as important as long range trends. Companies classified as "well" do not spend inordinate amounts of time and capital fighting illness within their organizations. They are able to operate in a vigorous high-energy climate that acknowledges the employee as the primary resource in the organization. Healthy organizations can not be managed by unhealthy employees. In fact, it is of equal importance that clerical and blue collar employees experience a high level of wellness. Peters and Waterman (6) contend that the excellent companies treat the rank and file as the root source of quality and productivity gain. There are certainly other factors that weigh on the financial success of the organization, however employee well-being is fundamental to long-term profitability.

If employees are the primary natural resource of most companies, what is being done to protect the investment? The efforts of organized labor, combined with mid-level and top management's inability to adopt humanistic motivational strategies, has maintained an oversimplified approach to employee productivity. This scientific management approach, based on financial incentives, fails to address the needs of today's worker. Among younger employees, the reward of "time off with or without pay" is often more attractive than the opportunity for "overtime pay."

When thinking of the employee as a primary natural resource, a broader conceptualization needs to take place at the recruitment stage. Previous and projected levels of performance will remain as primary criteria for employee selection at any level of the organization, but more emphasis should be placed on the prospective employee's level of wellness. Too often, this is totally ignored or limited to a brief physical examination. With death, illness, and absenteeism taking such a large toll on corporate profits, one would expect a closer scrutiny of the "raw material" prior to purchase. General Motors spends more money on the health plan for its employees than it does for the steel to make its automobiles! Ironically, medical intervention accounts for only about 10 percent of one's improved health (5). A conservative estimate places the cost of premature deaths to American industry at over \$25 billion per year. Heart disease alone accounts for over 52 million lost workdays each year! Corporations invest large amounts of time and money in sophisticated models and techniques to predict the outcomes of alternative decisions. Ironically, very little is done to assess the long term health risks of prospective employees. Consequently, that fast-track young executive suffering from obesity and high blood pressure associated with lack of exercise, limited leisure interests or skills, daily three martini luncheon meetings, and near constant mental stress becomes one of the 600,000 U.S. citizens to die annually from heart and vascular disease. Just when the company's investment begins to pay high dividends the machinery breaks down!

Based on the premise that the company will only be as well as its employees, it is logical that the organization recognizes the importance of attracting and keeping healthy workers. According to Ardell (1), high level wellness is a lifestyle-focused approach which is designed for the purpose of pursuing the highest level of health within one's capability. A lifestyle that incorporates self-responsibility, nutrition awareness, physical fitness, stress management, and environmental sensitivity will minimize chances of becoming ill and vastly increase one's prospects for well-being. Ardell goes on to link three components or levels of freedom to high level wellness: the physical, the emotional, and the mental.

Physical well-being consists of freedom from pain and limiting illness. Low back pain alone accounts for significant losses to business and industry each year through absenteeism and decreased

efficiency. According to Burke (2), more money is spent on low back pain relief than on heart disease or traffic accidents. One out of three people suffers back pain all the time, while 80 percent of all people are incapacitated by low back pain at some time in their lives.

Emotional well-being involves freedom from disabling stress. In some cases it involves elimination of the stressors while in other situations it might include strategies to better cope with stress producing factors. Characteristic of most executive positions is great mental stress, pressure that must have some kind of escape valve. It is important for employees to have a zest for living, but at the same time value the importance of relaxation. The serenity and calm that prevails among certain key decision makers when conditions are at their worst exemplifies this state of well-being. Ardell (1) describes mental freedom as a state of compassion and purpose, freedom from selfishness and aimlessness. Is it possible for the company to be unselfish and profitable at the same time? Is it possible for the employee to be unselfish and still meet his or her personal goals in the workplace? Successful companies answer both questions in the affirmative. It would be grossly naive to think that disagreement between labor and management does not occur in the "well" company, and that hard line negotiation and compromise is not responsible for many decisions. However, in "well" organizations, the ultimate aim is to meet the needs of the company AND its human resources.

Private business and industry can not afford to sit back and wait for other institutions to assume responsibility for fostering wellness among its employees. Employers must join various preventative health care institutions in providing leadership, facilities and programs. Several implementation models exist for companies of various sizes and structures. Some companies have elected to directly provide a comprehensive employee wellness program, while others have contracted with YMCA's, municipal agencies, hospitals, and private commercial leisure/health oriented establishments. Unfortunately, too many corporate wellness programs are established in hopes of dramatically impacting on profits or lowering health care expenditures. When immediate results are not witnessed, the project is abandoned. Too often, the wellness project lacks the holistic orientation that includes physical fitness, nutrition awareness, stress management, environmental sensitivity, and above all, self-responsibility.

Strength and flexibility are important to ones overall fitness, but they should not be emphasized without enthusiastically identifying and marketing the comparative benefits of cardiovascular forms of exercise. The combination of cigarette smoking and physical inactivity account for as much as 50 percent of all premature deaths in the United States. Substitutes for the physical activity that everyday life no longer provides must be provided. According to the American Medical Association, two of the most serious occupational health hazards are the desk and the swivel chair. Moreover, the typical job in a modern office or automated factory requires less exertion than the shower one takes AFTER a brisk workout. There is currently a need for guidelines

regarding adequate development and supervision of employee exercise programs. Likewise, exercise programs need to be packaged in a more attractive fashion; they need not be drudgery. Retention rates go up when the exercise becomes recreation to the individual. While it is important for the employee to witness improvement, there needn't be an atmosphere of competition or comparison of performance. Along with the strength, flexibility and cardiovascular benefits associated with exercise, employees will experience reduced levels of stored fat, better food digestion, more restful sleep, less chronic fatigue, less nervous tension, and an improved self image and outlook on life.

Successful adaptation to internal, social and environmental stress is an ingredient of high level wellness that is in turn beneficial to the company. It is not only the top level executive that is exposed to high levels of stress. The marginal mid-management employee fighting for the promotion beyond his professional capabilities, the alcoholic (9 million of them) or substance abuser unable to cope with the psychological and physical demands of his or her lifestyle, the single parent clerical worker trying to raise a family on minimal earnings, and the assembly line worker who is bored stiff with his job but afraid of getting laid off; all examples of high stress situations.

An established wellness program permits the company to focus on the individual. Rather than trying to make the JOB more interesting, the employer can assist the employee to make his or her LIFE more interesting. It is difficult to alter lifestyle, even when we know it is in our best interest. It is difficult, but not impossible; especially when incentives are provided by top management along with the support of professional staff and peers.

Consumer awareness relative to the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the place we call home is another important aspect of a corporate wellness program. Strategies for being an effective change agent regarding one's physical surroundings, including the marketplace, should also be recognized as a worthy component of the wellness program. The employee is responsible for his or her own well-being. The boredom experienced by the employee is often due more to a lack of personal depth than actual physical alternatives.

Finally we come to the mental component of wellness that Ardell (1) refers to as a freedom from selfishness and aimlessness. At face value, it seems to be contradictory to the competitive environment in which most companies operate. This component of a wellness program reveals itself in the willingness of top management to focus on employees as individuals. The programs and services aimed at employee well-being provide such a statement. An employee who feels good about himself and his purpose in life, whether job related or not, is going to perform better while at work.

A comprehensive wellness program is more than an efficient and trim

body. It is more than toned muscles and an understanding of dietary requirements. A wellness program is more than decreased mental stress and anxiety. A positively administered wellness program can help employees "discover" themselves. It is a good feeling to occupy one's body with a sense of delight and satisfaction; to learn that it is alright to do things because we want to--without thought of payment; to pursue experiences that are filled with meaning but little or no purpose.

Carlyon (3) says it best in his poem, The Healthiest Couple:

They brush and they floss
with care everyday,
But not before breakfast
of both curds and whey.

He jogs for his heart
she bikes for her nerves;
They assert themselves daily
with appropriate verve.

He is loving and tender
and caring and kind,
Not one chauvinist thought
is allowed in his mind.

They are slim and attractive
well-dressed and just fun.
They are strong and well-immunized
against everything under the sun.

They are sparkling and lively
and having a ball.
Their diet? High fiber
and low cholesterol.

Cocktails are avoided
in favor of juice;
Cigarettes are shunned
as one would the noose;

They drive their car safely
with belts well in place;
at home not one hazard
ever will they face.

1.2 children they raise,
both sharing the job.
One is named Betty,
Point 2 is named Bob.

And when at the age of
two hundred and three
they jog for his life

to one still more free,
They'll pass through those portals
to claim their reward
and St. Peter will stop them
"just for a word."

"What Ho" he will say,
"You cannot go in.
This place is reserved
for those without sin."

"But we've followed the rules"
she'll say with a fright.
"We're healthy" - "Near perfect"
"And incredibly bright."

"But that's it" will say Peter,
drawing himself tall.
"You've missed the point of living
"By thinking so small."

"Life is more than health habits,
Though useful they be,
It is purpose and meaning,
the grand mystery."

"You've discovered a part
of what makes humans whole
and mistaken that part
for the shape of the soul."

"You are fitter than fiddles
and sound as a bell,
Self-righteous, intolerant
and boring as hell."

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