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THE UNION ROLE IN FITNESS
PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

A concern by management for the enriched lifestyle of its employees led to the development of industrial recreation programs during leisure hours. Evolving from this concept has been the relatively recent interest in employee fitness programs.

Until recently, the question of labour viewing these programs as a potential negotiable benefit was never addressed. However, it is anticipated that this will change. Labour did not show an interest in this area before because fitness facilities were small, totally paid for by management and participants tended to be middle and upper, white-collar management levels.

Labour interest has now increased due to expansion of fitness facilities and thus, many programs allow all employees to take part and even charge a slight fee. Program results reveal benefits to companies in absenteeism and productivity measures which are statistics well known to labour negotiation.

Labour must now conduct research to ascertain such things as who should take part in a fitness program, who pays, company time for workouts, can personnel departments use test results for promotion, etc? They require this information because employee fitness programs should perhaps be a negotiated benefit.

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INTRODUCTION

As leisure time expanded over the years, many businesses developed which provided products and services to the public which allowed for the increased enjoyment of leisure time.

This concept of leisure time playing an important role in the lifestyle of the public away from their work, also began to take on a new meaning for employees at their place of work.

Businesses began to realize that they had a responsibility to provide some form of recreational services for their employees as it was only natural that the employees would want to fill their leisure time with friends from work. This demonstrated concern by management for the enriched lifestyle of its employees, by providing recreational opportunities soon led to a happier work environment(4). This, in turn, led to an improved employee-employer work relationship and industrial recreation programs were solidly entrenched in the philosophy of business.

An example of such a philosophy is the management style of Sullair Corporation in Michigan City, Indiana and its President, Don Hoodes, who runs the plant like a country club(1). They have two indoor and two outdoor tennis courts, a full-time tennis pro who gives free lessons, a basketball court, squash court, sauna, rifle range, olympic-size swimming pool and an office pub that serves free liquor plus numerous other employee benefits. Hoodes stated, 'if people have the right motivation, you get high productivity' An estimate is that his employees outproduce his U.S. competitors almost three to one and absenteeism is down to near zero.

Developing from industrial recreation programs has been a concept of employee fitness programs stressing cardiovascular improvement. Until recently, unions were not involved in assessing these fitness programs as a negotiable benefit. In fact, the question of unions and employee fitness programs was never even addressed at fitness related conferences.

It always seems to be a question of management and employees -should management provided a program or not and do the employees really want a program and for how long will they want it?

So, is there any room for unions in all of this and if there is, why have they not been involved before? The answer is that at first there did not seem to be a place for unions in this question but a prediction is that unions will soon be presenting fitness programs as a negotiable benefit. Therefore, it appears to be opportune to analyze the reasons for union interest.

WHY NO PRIOR UNION INTEREST?

The development of employee fitness programs occurred at middle and upper management levels, basically to save the senior executives from heart attacks, etc. This pattern was adopted from company to company because of the communication pattern of those executives, that is, the white-collar participant talked of the benefits of such a program to other white-collar employees.

Also, the facilities that were developed tended to be the small, so called 'capsule labs' i.e. exercise stations in a small room. Thus, it was not so much an exercise class as it was merely individual programming.

As well, unions were less interested because the company tended to pay for everything and not even all the white-collar workers were eligible for such programs.

Unions did not tend to see exercise as an employee benefit, in fact, there was wide-spread doubt that it even belonged in the work place.

However, the situation has changed and an examination of those changes is in order.

WHY UNION INTEREST HAS INCREASED?

One of the main reasons is that many fitness programs have expanded from white-collar restricted programs to include all employees who are interested. Thus, the communication pattern has now spread to secretaries, lower level management and blue-collar workers and the dialogue has increased the interest shown by other companies. The reason for employee fitness programs has now gone beyond "heart attack" prevention to a "prescription for everyone to enjoy life more".

Another factor is that company exercise facilities have increased in size. Many companies have enlarged the space allocated to the fitness area by a further renovation or indeed, have designed fitness areas into the plans for a new building. Thus, many group exercise programs have developed allowing more employees to take part.

Also, many companies now ask the employees to contribute to the cost although minimally in most instances. In actuality a slight fee is considered to be a good incentive for continuing in the program.

Industrial recreation programs have also started to include fitness programming into their multitude of activities and this has led to a greater interest by the blue-collar worker and this type of company.

Finally, management is now realizing the benefits accruing to companies with fitness programs in the area of absenteeism, productivity, increased morale and employee retention and recruitment. Thus, union groups now see fitness programs as being more closely related to the employee benefit package and feel that perhaps they should bargain for it in the total benefit package.

I suggest that we are at this wondering stage presently in employee fitness program development. It appears that unions should become more educated on this topic as employee interest grows.

UNIONS - WHAT TO RESEARCH?

There are a number of questions that should be researched, in fact, a recommendation from a 1974 Canadian national conference on employee fitness stated: "Labour should state clearly their interest in fitness programs as part of their labour policies"(3).

Another recommendation from this conference stated: "Management and labour should co-operate in the development of educational programs on fitness in the same way that they co-operate on safety programs". Information gathered by Participation, a private non-profit corporation working in cooperation with the Canadian government, revealed that vulnerability to industrial accidents decreased two to three-fold for fit employees.(2)

Union management should circulate questionnaires to see if their membership is interested (keeping in mind that everyone is interested when answering a questionnaire but do not always follow through and join the program). For instance, should there be different facilities for white-collar and blue-collar workers; indications are that some blue-collar workers prefer it divided and others want a mix. Should retirees and families be included in the benefits?

The question of who pays for fitness programs is important; should companies pay entirely or should the employees pay for a partial fee?

The time period for the workout is important, for instance, will the program take place on company time totally or partially? Legal ramifications as to company responsibility become important in this area.

What about research done on the employee fitness group, how should it be used? Should it be used for absenteeism/productivity analyses? Should the employee fitness/health profile ever be used in terms of deciding on promotions within the company? Most people will say that this would never happen, but how can one be sure? Also, what about the employees who decide not to join the exercise program, who is protecting their rights? Will they lose out on promotions?

The above questions represent areas for concern which require research by union groups. The results will indicate whether or not blue-collar workers want an exercise program or whether they would prefer to have the union negotiate other benefits? As well, the results may allow for unions to speak up for employees of small and medium sized companies who perhaps are not being given a chance to have a program due to management lack of interest.

If nothing else, if there is a fitness committee operating within a company without union representation, it is hoped that this situation would change.

CONCLUSION

Employee fitness programs are good for all concerned but they are not becoming an accepted part of management philosophy quickly enough. Thus, it is perhaps time for labour to seriously analyze the whole question and develop policies related to this area. Labour groups must accept this challenge and then, possibly, employee fitness programs will become a negotiated benefit.

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