

PASSAGE TO WELLNESS

Senior leadership, managers and employees explore effective tactics for health programs

Successful wellness programs can transform employee health and significantly save plan sponsors immediate and long-term health costs. But some organizations mistakenly assume they need big budgets to put wellness initiatives in motion.

Whether you are a small or large plan sponsor, the basic principles of developing a successful health and wellness program are the same. “It is important to remember that wellness is a cultural change and, therefore, a journey,” says Kirk McIntyre, vice-president, group benefits, Ontario, with Medavie Blue Cross in Toronto. “Begin modestly with a focus on the low-hanging fruit, including the causes of excessive attrition, absenteeism and drug utilization. This approach will improve the odds of success and early savings, paving the way for future opportunities.”

Fair enough. But how does an organization turn its vision for healthier

employees into an action plan and, ultimately, into results? That’s the question *Benefits Canada* posed to more than a dozen experts in workplace benefits and wellness from across the country for a discussion about practical strategies. The message from the 2012 *Benefits Canada* Workplace Health & Benefits roundtable was a clear three-step itinerary: create a tailored business case for the C-suite; empower managers with tools, training and support; and then engage employees with easy and relatable programs.

C-SUITE SUPPORT

The foundation of any wellness program is the support of senior management. If they’re not behind it, the programs wouldn’t exist, says Meaghan Jansen, corporate wellness specialist with Employee Wellness Solutions Network in London, Ont. “They are the ones who are going to give you the green light to go ahead



Christine Sokaluk, 4Refuel Canada

with a program. But they can also take part in some of the activities, and that speaks volumes to the employees.”

When a C-suite executive participates, it can take a wellness program to the next level, says Karen Kesteris, director of marketing and product development with Green Shield Canada in Toronto. “It’s one thing to provide funding for it; it’s something else to actually participate. But that’s where they often fall down.”

Janet Crowe, director, wellness and work-life solutions, with TELUS Communications in Vancouver, says the active support of her executive team made a significant impact on how employees perceive the program. Hearing that the CFO participated in one of the health screening events encouraged employees to get involved in the programs because it was perceived as clearly important to the organization.

ON BOARD THE C-SUITE

Yet, getting the CEO and CFO to take wellness seriously enough to invest in it is a challenge. They need to see health and wellness as a critical resource just like other areas of the business, says Kesteris. HR managers need to shape the wellness story in a way that catches their attention.

For Crowe, the initial challenge at TELUS Communications was the risk management of benefits costs. At the outset, cost was the driver, says Crowe, who tailored not only her communications with senior leadership so they could understand the value her programs could offer their business units, but also the cost of not embracing it.

For example, an HR team can identify the main cost drivers in the company’s benefits plan. It might be cardiovascular disease, diabetes or depression. Then, suggests Crowe, pick an area to focus on where you can collect measurable data that will catch a senior executive’s attention.

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At TELUS Communications, mental health issues were a major challenge, which is why Crowe first focused on getting employees into screening clinics for cardiovascular disease, and then on providing high-risk cases with tools to manage the disease. "I wanted to establish our credibility," she explains. "This gave us data to say to the CFO, "These illnesses account for only 12%, and this is how much money we're saving when we're doing programs. If you extrapolate that to a mental health strategy, I can save you a lot more.'"

Once HR managers have grabbed the attention of the senior executives by appealing to the bottom line; they need to focus the wellness strategy to retain that support. "Far too many employers do it piecemeal, which means you're not investing the limited dollars to where they're really needed," says Katherine Tilsley, director, North American retail compensation and Canadian benefits,

with Staples Canada in Richmond Hill, Ont. "You really need to spend the money where you're going to see outcomes, because unless you can show some ROI, you're not going to get the next dollar."

Another part of keeping the C-suite engaged is aligning programming to match the organizational objectives, says Jansen. "What are the objectives of the wellness program at the CEO level, the manager level and the employee level? It's important to think about and build a strategy before trying to throw darts at programs hoping they are going to work. It's only going to improve the level of success you have with it."

FOCUS ON MANAGERS

Making a wellness program successful starts with senior executives. When an HR team has designed a program on metrics that are meaningful to its employee group, it needs to change the

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 STAPLES CANADA

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Jonathon Avery, Manulife Financial

A major part of communicating about health and wellness is education

culture of the organization to get people participating in the program. And it's up to managers to drive this momentum.

"Wellness has to be embedded into the organizational culture, how it operates, how teams are led and how the whole organization survives," says Crowe. Managers are the key to making that happen. They have the power to change the culture of an organization to be more focused on health, but they need support and tools in order to thrive.

"The champions in an organization have to be pretty focused to move wellness programs forward," says Paula Allen, vice-president, health solutions, with Morneau Shepell in Toronto.

Kathy Sotirakos, senior market access manager, private insurance, with Amgen Canada Inc. in Mississauga, Ont., says the easiest way to turn managers into champions is to motivate them to prioritize health and wellness.

But that can be a challenge, says Laura Pratt, practice leader, organizational health, with Great-West Life. "Managers have a lot on their plates, so how do we make the importance of wellness real for them? Try thinking about it from a performance management perspective. Look for ways to include absence or return-to-work trends in department performance measures," she says. Managers may be more likely to embrace wellness programs or initiatives when they know the health of their department will be a component of their results.

If an organization makes employee health part of a manager's responsibility, it needs to provide tools for that person to succeed. "The relationship with the manager plays such a huge role in employee health," says Jonathon Avery,

senior health management consultant, group benefits, with Manulife Financial in Toronto. He adds that managers need training in how to provide wellness to employees, even if that's simply explaining the wellness initiatives, teaching active listening skills or showing them how to direct employees to resources.

For example, Angela Chen, manager, HR, with Canada Health Infoway Inc. in Toronto, engaged her leaders with focus groups when launching a health risk assessment (HRA), and it was worth the effort. "By doing so, we had a 68% participation rate with the HRA, which is phenomenal," she says.

When TELUS Communications began to target mental health, Crowe focused on giving managers training on mental health issues and provided additional support for those managers with employees managing an illness. "One of my biggest things was manager support and resiliency training. A lot of times we focus so much on the unhealthy team member that we forget

about the manager and the team dealing with it," she says.

This is especially true in the growing area of mental health. Empowering managers with tools to make wellness real for their employees increases the chances of engagement and, ultimately, the success of the program.

REMEMBER THE EMPLOYEES

A supportive C-suite and an engaged group of managers can get a wellness program rolling, but it won't pick up speed until the employees participate. Aside from encouraging managers, communication and incentives are two main pieces for success.

Crowe says when you're designing communication for wellness programs, it's essential to think of it as internal marketing. Identify which groups exist and determine the messages that will best engage them.

Jeff Harrison, manager of health and safety at London Hydro Inc. in London, Ont., had to be really creative with his communication to the different types of staff. "Because of the diversity of the work we do, our operations staff typically work off-site. We had to find creative ways to communicate the health and wellness information to our outside staff. The usual strategies such as lunch and learns were difficult to co-ordinate due to travel time and work scheduling. It was decided that during the scheduled operations safety meetings, time would be allocated for the

health and wellness consultant to join the meeting and present a variety of topics. This has been a real success," he says.

When Tanya Hogan, director, health solutions and pharmacy projects, with Shoppers Drug Mart in Toronto, and her team were making substantial changes to the company's health benefits and wellness offering, communication played a major role and was a secret to the overall success. "We had a communications plan with HR, and it was a cascading structure through the organization that included a lot of web presentations to explain changes," she says.

Realize that the results of a well-planned communication strategy can take time to see, advises Dudley Clarke, superintendent, HR, with Teck Metals Ltd. – Trail Operations, in Trail, B.C. "Initially, our wellness activities tended to draw employees who generally were already physically healthy and active. It took a couple of years of offering and communicating programs before we really started to see our target audience—those that were less active and likely less health-conscious—start to participate."

A major part of communicating about health and wellness is education. A huge success for Ariela Constantinidis, vice-president, HR, with 4Refuel Canada in Oakville, Ont., is the company's "benefits-at-a-glance" overview, which explains in one page the benefits available for employees. "Employees are not benefits experts. We have to keep it simple for them," she says.



Kathy Sotirakos, Rx&D

Allen adds that employers should be heavily incorporating technology to help communicate with and educate their employees. "Everyone is very, very busy. An integrated portal where people can select benefits, complete an HRA, get decision support on their benefits, find a total reward statement and enrol in programs is another way to help employees engage."

Christine Sokaluk, payroll and benefits analyst with 4Refuel Canada in Oakville, Ont., says the added benefit of



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BACK ROW L TO R: Kathy Sotirakos, Rx&D; Laura Pratt, Great-West Life; Kirk McIntyre, Medavie Blue Cross; Angela Chen, Canada Health Infoway Inc.; Ariela Constantinidis, 4Refuel Canada; Karen Kesteris, Green Shield Canada; Dudley Clarke, Teck Metals Ltd.; Janet Crowe, TELUS Communications; Christine Sokaluk, 4Refuel Canada. **FRONT ROW L TO R:** Jonathon Avery, Manulife Financial; Heather Creighton, MHCSI; Paula Allen, Morneau Shepell; Tanya Hogan, Shoppers Drug Mart; Jeff Harrison, London Hydro; Meaghan Jansen, Employee Wellness Solutions Network; Katherine Tilsley, Staples Canada Inc.

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making employees aware of all the programs offered is that it builds a culture of support by providing the opportunity to direct employees to the specific services they need.

When employee groups require additional support on understanding health issues and disease management, it can help to bring in relevant outside perspectives from nurses, pharmacists or dietitians to answer questions and provide education, says Heather Creighton, consultant pharmacist with MHCSI Managed Health Care Services Inc. in Dartmouth, N.S.

Remember to think about the multiple generations now in the workplace, says Avery. Kesteris adds that every individual in a workplace will have different motivations for getting healthy—or staying unhealthy. So it's crucial to use a variety of technology platforms to share messages and engage employees.

A tried-and-true way to get employees involved is to provide incentives. “Everybody knows they should be participating in healthy behaviours, but employees cite in our HRA that they lack time or it’s

too expensive or they don’t know how to do it,” says Tilsley. To combat this, her organization implemented a program that awards small incentives for healthy habits, such as going to the gym, and offered a vacation prize to get people to participate in the HRA. “Sometimes it’s that little nudge to actually get people to do it, and repeating the behaviour over and over will make it a habit,” she says.

Jansen had a similar experience with one of her clients. The company introduced a program where employees could complete healthy activities as a group to gain points and compete against other teams. “The idea with incentives is to start somewhere and the behaviour will build upon itself,” she says.

When a wellness strategy can demonstrate ROI to the C-suite, support management and engage employees, it is en route to success. Along the way, when you face challenges or want to give up, Crowe has this advice: “No matter where you are in your journey, if you’re passionate about it and you believe in what you’re doing, that will bring it to the next level.” ■