CULTURE OF HEALTH
IN THE WORKPLACE

The foundation for success in employee health and wellbeing

Virgin Pulse

INTRODUCTION

CULTURE OF HEALTH

Many employers have implemented workplace health and wellbeing programs for years, or even decades. According to a recent Rand Workplace Wellness study, about 50 percent of all employers in the United States reported they had a program in place, but for companies that had more than 50,000 employees, that number jumps to 90 percent. Despite the popularity of these programs, outcomes such as strong employee participation, population-level health improvement, increased productivity and lowered absenteeism remain elusive in many situations.[1-3]

There are several reasons organizations might experience a gap between expected and achieved results:

- A "one-size-fits-all" program has been implemented that doesn't appeal to the range of employees' actual interests and needs.
- Lack of leadership support or gaps between leadership's vision and actual implementation.
- Companies may not realize there is a mismatch between goals and execution, or prerequisite factors needed for success are absent.

These challenges can be found in companies regardless of size, industry, location or type of wellbeing program.

When it comes to health and wellbeing programs, many organizations have adopted a more sophisticated, holistic approach by fostering a strong Culture of Health. Programs that achieve positive value-on-investment consistently have strong leadership support, supportive policies and physical environments conducive to healthy habits like healthy eating and physical activity.[4-6] In other words, it is not just about the programs; it is also about the company's attitude, and having a supportive physical and social environment.

Purposeful curation of a Culture of Health is essential to wellbeing program success because it creates alignment within the organization, allows for greater effectiveness in delivering programs and resources that support health[7], and communicates the value of employee health with greater authenticity.

A perspective that considers the culture and environment is also powerful because it supports everybody in the population regardless of health status and does not depend on selective participation. As much as possible, healthy behaviors and habits just become "what people do."

Furthermore, when employees perceive that the organization values them by supporting their health, there is a reciprocity that supports greater job satisfaction and lower turnover along with the larger objectives of the organization.[4, 8-10]

Conversely, if people feel no more valued than the computer or machine they work on, the results that manifest include low morale, poor job satisfaction, high turnover and negativity—thwarting organizational objectives and undermining efforts to promote health and wellbeing. Authentically communicating that employee wellbeing is valued in the organization also communicates that employees are valued.

IDENTIFYING MISALIGNMENT

Achieving alignment means supporting the leadership vision with policies that create easy access to resources that nurture and encourage healthy habits. Manager support is a main factor as well, since manager priorities are employees' priorities. Studies have shown manager support to be an important factor for wellbeing program participation.[8, 11]

Organizations don't intend to send mixed messages to people with misalignments between their stated organization goals and their behavior as perceived by employees. They aren't usually aware misalignment exists. But these dynamics can undermine resources so that they are less effective than they could be. Nothing is more frustrating to employees than wanting to engage in their health and wellbeing, but finding that doing so is at odds with policies, priorities or workload.

Unfortunately, when such misalignment occurs, the employer message of valuing employee health and wellbeing is undermined. Subtle but powerful factors in the culture can either undermine or facilitate the impact of health and wellbeing programs.[12]

Identifying and correcting these misalignments leads to a more effective approach and to more efficient use of resources. Alignment of cultural elements supporting employee health yields mutually reinforcing dynamics. Uncovering perceived cultural strengths and weaknesses from multiple perspectives in the organization represents the first step toward identifying misalignments and creating a stronger Culture of Health.

Developing a Culture of Health might be the single most important strategy your company can implement. That's not an overstatement. It's supported by research from the University of Michigan[8, 13] and experienced across diverse company settings.[14] Unfortunately, most employers don't know how to actively create such a Culture of Health, or how to measure or improve a culture already in place.

This position paper provides insight into the latest methods on measurement, how data can be turned into action, and why investment in a Culture of Health offers you returns in significant ways.

Cultural dynamics can either undermine or amplify health and wellbeing efforts at an organization. Until now, few tools or methods have been available to systematically measure a Culture of Health as the basis for creating organization-specific strategies and action plans.

MEASUREMENT

CULTIVATING INSIGHT

While the importance of culture is well-recoginized, few measurement tools exist to inform strategies, engage leadership, and track progress over time. Achieving insights that can be measured and drive action requires a multi-faceted measurement approach. Virgin Pulse's Culture Check does this by addressing four areas supported by validated tools, evidence and best practices.

Employee perspective

You don't need an extensive survey that takes excessive employee time to answer. Instead, implement an assessment that can capture essential employee and manager perceptions overall and within each location.

It's especially important to use a data-driven survey that has been tested with other organizations and has undergone validation and refinement by experts.

The employee's perspective on your workplace culture is multi-dimensional. Any tool to assess the culture must include many dimensions that influence people's attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the dimensions need to align with the way organizations are structured. Often academic constructs or models are informative, but don't translate to the practical applications of strategies. Some important areas to consider include: support from senior leadership, management and co-workers, policies, physical environment and wellbeing programs. Other important areas include morale (stress, job satisfaction, job security, sense of community) and behavioral norms. All of these factors influence people's attitudes, health habits, and engagement in wellbeing programs. Being able to

assess and quantify areas of culture is very powerful in allowing organizations to identify strengths to leverage and address opportunities that would otherwise be unknown. After using the Wellbeing at Work employee viewpoint survey, one organization realized their management was actively dissuading forms of exercise at work due to liability concerns. Upon realization of this misalignment with the company's vision of improving health and physical activity, communication strategies and restructuring of programs were implemented to address the concern. Managers' input was also solicited, so they were involved in the process.

Another organization implemented extensive wellbeing programs only to have minimal participation year-over-year. Upon using the employee survey, they realized employees simply were not aware of the programs From the survey, the company learned that people who did participate liked and appreciated the programs. Implementing more cohesive and comprehensive communication strategy was the first step. For wellbeing programs, it is important to determine if issues like awareness, logistics (accessibility) or program value could be present. That level of detailed information is key to enacting an effective action plan.

Leadership point of view interviews

Many times, lackluster engagement in wellness occurs as a result of a considerable gap between leader views and employee perceptions. What leaders think is happening may be vastly different from what employees experience. And that can be problematic.

For example, leadership may feel resources are provided, but through lack of effective design, implementation, communication or access, employees don't benefit from them. At one employer, leadership changed the food offerings in the cafeteria, but the order never was delivered to the vendor. Thus, leadership was surprised when employees complained about the lack of healthy foods in the cafeteria.

Leadership interviews can help clarify the vision regarding employee health and wellbeing, and then compare that vision to the actual policies and procedures, metrics of interest, and the perceived value of employee health to the rest of the organization.

The outcomes of the interviews can also help identify opportunities for improved support for a culture of health and the overall wellbeing program. Promoting wellbeing can be a competing priority for upper management, especially when leadership is unaware that they are not being supportive.

Program reviews

When assessing program design and execution, use evidence-based industry best practices (as opposed to simply relying on conventional wisdom). Consider bringing in experts who have worked with companies of various sizes and situations. Conduct a structured review of a program's design, ideally supported by a quantitative model that pinpoints and prioritizes improvement areas.

Diving deep into program nuances—particularly historical engagement efforts and campaign success levels—can be illuminating for making decisions about what's worked, what hasn't, and what should be considered going forward.

Environmental reviews

Often, employee wellness programs consider what's on site for fitness options, and while that's important, it's only one factor to look for in an on-site review. How conducive is the physical environment to making healthy choices? Answering that question can be an essential prerequisite to establishing a stronger Culture of Health.

Look at neighborhood and area resources. For example, can employees get a healthy lunch nearby? Are there walking paths or sidewalks that allow employees to walk during the day? Or are the only options for quick energy of the candy and chips variety? Knowing what's available can drive efforts to harness those resources for maximum impact.

USING THE DATA

TAKING ACTIONS

With measurement and observations in place, you can build a 360-degree view of an organization that can be used to inform strategy and specific, actionable items. Having data to support strategies along with concise reporting provides a powerful avenue to engage senior leadership.

Customized recommendations

Discoveries made through the short Wellbeing at Work employee survey, leader interviews, program reviews and on-site review of the physical environment can inform a more customized approach that helps you create a unique program design tuned to your organizational assets, gaps and aspirations.

Location-specific insights

Even within the same company, you may find considerable differences between geographical locations or work groups. For example, initiatives that gained strong traction at a headquarters in Chicago may have to be modified for a branch office, call center or factory in Omaha due to local differences.

Locations and teams can vary widely with respect to sub-culture, preferences, goals, resources and support. Maybe the corporate office offers an on-site cafeteria where employees can choose from an array of healthy food options. But in the factory location, vending machines or nearby fast food restaurants are the only food options, which sabotages people's efforts. Knowing these types of details requires data that takes all aspects of wellbeing program design into account.

Best practices

Specific, actionable recommendations are based on a set of best practice criteria and validated data collection methods. That means you can have confidence in design principles and implementation methods rather than relying on traditional or on vague hope that the program will be appealing.

A robust Culture of Health considers how conducive an environment is in supporting health and wellbeing practices. It takes leadership support and health goals into account, and is rooted in concrete data that informs a best possible starting point.

Progress measurement

Where many wellbeing programs falter is in tracking progress, particularly when it comes to comparing campaigns and initiatives against each other to determine what's working best. The result? Less-successful program elements take valuable resources away from others that might be performing better.

Being able to measure progress and results is crucial for responding quickly and decisively with employee-focused programs geared toward higher engagement levels. Enthusiasm is addictive. Building on that with programs that draw more interest and activity is a vital part of developing a strong Culture of Health.

Ongoing efforts

A Culture of Health isn't an endpoint, it's an ongoing dynamic of a worksite that can change over time, but when cultivated, creates the foundation for ongoing success. Employees respond better when they perceive a sustained, authentic commitment to their wellbeing.

Like any effort, making a temporary shift toward health and wellbeing and then abandoning that momentum will yield only lackluster results, or worse, will foster cynicism. Using data to inform recommendations in ways that are meaningful and ongoing will lead to sustainable programs that are perceived as essential elements of a culture of health, rather than short-term tactics.

CONCLUSION

THE NEW STANDARD IN HOW COMPANIES APPROACH EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

With valid measurements and observations, and data-driven recommendations, an organization puts itself in a much better position to engage employees and advance its Culture of Health.

Doing so sets a foundation for stronger employee relationships grounded in an authentically perceived interest in health and wellbeing. It also increases the likelihood that the company will enjoy a constellation of business benefits including:

- Better individual and team performance due to more engaged employees

- Less absenteeism, and more "presenteeism"

- Greater talent and knowledge retention, translating to lower recruiting and training costs

- Higher employee morale related to perception of being supported

- A more attractive environment for recruiting top talent, even in competitive industries

- Establishment of a company reputation as an organization that values employee health and wellness

- A decrease in costs related to rising risks, particularly among those with chronic conditions or pre-conditions

Establishing a strong Culture of Health starts with understanding the factors and perceptions that contribute to the health and wellbeing of all employees, along with the leadership supported for well-designed and adapted programs that bolster that focus. It means:

- Acknowledging that employee perceptions are not only important, but even crucial to the success of the program

- Recognizing that gaps between leadership and employee perception may be much wider than you may think

- Embracing the reality that establishing a robust Culture of Health leads to an array of results that drive a company forward, and the absence of such cultural support undermines even the best program designs.

A strong Culture of Health can be transformative in powering better health and wellbeing program performance within organization and in any industry.

By taking a thorough, data-driven approach blended with best practices and expert guidance, organizations can make real progress toward achieving more authentic relationships with employees, and a higher performing workforce

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ABOUT VIRGIN PULSE

Virgin Pulse, part of Sir Richard Branson's famed Virgin Group, helps employers create workforces that are happier, healthier and ultimately more productive in all aspects of their personal and professional lives.

The company's modern, mobile-first platform delivers a personalized user experience that utilizes gamification to engage users in building habits that inspire meaningful and measurable change across individuals and the business.

By helping employees thrive at work and in all aspects of life, Virgin Pulse is helping change lives and businesses for good.

Unlike narrowly focused employee health solutions, Virgin Pulse's solutions span the full wellbeing spectrum – from traditional wellness to strategic wellbeing – providing organizations with solutions that are appropriate for them today and tomorrow.

More than 2,500 organizations representing many of the Fortune 500 and Best Places to Work have selected Virgin Pulse's solutions to engage their workforces and drive their businesses forward.

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