

5 Critical Flaws of Wellness Programs

By Tad Mitchell, President & CEO of WellRight, Inc.

Designing a wellness program is not an easy job. Sure, the changes people need to make for better health are pretty straightforward. The trick is getting people to do them. What is the best motivator? Will big rewards make the difference? Can peer support or even peer pressure be used? How much is too much to ask? Are we asking enough to keep people interested or motivated? What are the activities that will yield the highest return? Will the program build organization culture or destroy it?

The answer to each of these questions is different for every organization. What works at one place may not work well somewhere else. For this reason, careful thought needs to be given to each aspect of every wellness program. While it is not easy to design an effective wellness program, it is not hard to pinpoint some common flaws.

Flaw #1: The program prescribes the solution

Most wellness programs prescribe generic activities that everyone has to do. Some wellness programs customize the activities based each person's health status. However, in both cases, the person is told what they have to do. Unfortunately, people don't like to be told what to do. Even if the activity is the most logical thing for improving their health, people have their own ideas about what will work for them, what they want to work on, and how they want to do it.

It is far better to structure a wellness program in a way that allows people to choose what they want to do. A person is much more likely to sustain a behavior change if they choose the behavior. Sustained behavior change (whether it has a high impact or not), gives people the confidence they need to make bigger and better behavior changes.

Flaw #2: The program promotes temporary change

Of course, the intent of all wellness programs is to help people become healthier for the rest of their lives, not just by the end of the program. However, the design of most programs is in conflict with sustaining the goal. For example, one of the most popular wellness program challenges is the "Biggest Loser" challenge. It is true that many people lose lots of weight in these weight-loss challenges, but within months most are back to their previous weight because they have not made any permanent lifestyle changes to keep them at their new weight.

A wellness program that focuses on long-term change, should focus on building lifelong habits instead of drastic changes for short periods of time. For example, effective challenges might focus on eating more fruits and vegetables, limiting fried foods, limiting sugar, or eating whole grains. Habits like these are essential for long-term weight control. Even though they may be small changes, if they are permanent changes, they will have a significant effect over the long-term.

Flaw #3: The program focuses on fitness

When most people think of becoming healthier, they think of starting an exercise program. Wellness programs also tend to follow this approach. While exercise is important to overall health, nutrition and mental health are also vitally important. In fact, only moderate exercise levels are needed to maintain good health. True, additional exercise does burn more calories, but it cannot undo the harm that unhealthy foods do to the body.

Surprisingly, mental health is more important than most realize. Good mental health can actually reduce blood pressure. Social interaction and laughter contribute to excellent health. Humans also thrive when they have the opportunity to create, learn, and serve. A wellness program that include activities for healthy eating, exercise, and mental health will bring greater health benefits to the participants.

Flaw #4: The program misuses rewards

Many wellness programs offer hundreds or even thousands of dollars to those who fully participate. Rewards at this level are large enough that people feel entitled to have them - to the point that they will do whatever it takes, including lying and cheating, to obtain their reward. While large rewards may be effective at promoting short-term compliance, they actually work against instilling long-term change. After all, why would someone continue a rewarded behavior if they aren't offered another reward?

Ideally, people need to change because they want to change - or the change will not last. Rewards can jumpstart the process, but should only be used on a random basis after that. If large rewards are used, they should be tied to outcomes (BMI, stopped smoking, etc.), not behaviors (exercising, eating right). People should be left to select their own behavioral changes, so they are fully invested in them.

Flaw #5: The program caters to the healthy

Many wellness programs prescribe activities that are easy for generally healthy people and hard for the unhealthy. For example, a walking program with a distance goal of 50 miles throughout the month would be easy for a runner and potentially hard for many others. One way to level the playing field is to have a duration goal (1,000 minutes) instead of a distance goal (50 miles). This makes it possible for a slow walker to complete the challenge.

Including nutrition and mental health activities in the wellness program is another way to level the playing field. Everyone eats. A challenge to eat five vegetables a day is doable for most. A challenge to spend 500 minutes learning is something most people can do. In a sense, the broader the applicability of an activity, the more powerful it is because it allows more unhealthy people to participate.

About the Author

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