

The Six Tests of Leading a Healthy Company: How To Develop A Results-Oriented Wellness Program

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From where we sit, the entire process of building a results-oriented worksite wellness program revolves around leadership. In fact, for more than 20 years, we have been consistently communicating the importance of CEO and Senior Executive support as the backbone of any healthy company.

To be sure, there are many people who have disagreed with our approach. Indeed, many still believe that worksite wellness programs function more efficiently when they are built at the grassroots level. In theory, this sounds good, but our experience tells us differently. In working with more than 1,000 companies in our Well Workplace Awards initiative, we have learned that grassroots programs don't have nearly the impact or longevity of those programs that are driven from the top-down.

So if you are committed to building a results-oriented workplace wellness program, we implore you to begin with capturing CEO and Senior Executive support.

But how is it done? What is required? How do you know if you truly have it?

Believe it or not, answering these questions 10 years ago was difficult. Worksite wellness programs were still in their infancy, and there just weren't a whole lot of case studies whereby you could begin examining what CEO and Senior Executive support actually looked like.

Today, this is a very different story. At WELCOA, we have been studying and highlighting the process and elements of capturing CEO commitment for the purpose of developing a "best-in-class" program.

In so doing, we have identified several tests of leadership. Each of these tests will be examined in more detail in this article.

Leadership Defined

Before we examine the six tests of leadership, it's important that we begin this discussion by presenting a definition of leadership. Specifically, we believe that leadership is the ability to translate vision into reality and to sustain it over time. It's a simple, yet elegant and powerful statement. And, in a time where there are literally hundreds and hundreds of definitions of leadership, this one has served us quite well in the worksite wellness arena.

When we breakdown the different components of this definition, we find that there are basically two things going on in the leadership process. First, there is the idea of developing a bold vision that becomes very real in terms of how it impacts the organization. But it's also important to note that there is a second part

of this definition as well—and that has to do with sustaining the initiative over time. We've found in our experience that too many programs just simply disappear without a trace.

To sum it up, we believe that leadership within healthy companies will manifest itself both in terms of making the vision a concrete reality and then making sure that this new reality is sustained over the long haul.

The Tests Of Leading A Healthy Company

To effectively implement this definition of leadership within an organization requires that the leader successfully pass six different tests. These tests of leadership have been drawn from case studies of some of America's most progressive worksite wellness programs. And, time and time again, when we examine the metrics of companies who are competing for Well Workplace Awards, we find that these six tests emerge as the gold standard for evaluating CEO and Senior Executive leadership.

1. Feeling the Burden

The first test of leading a healthy company has to do with the CEOs level of care and concern for the organization's employees. Plain and simple, if the CEO doesn't feel the burden of responsibility for making sure that they are addressing the health and wellness needs of their workforce, the worksite wellness initiative usually rings hollow. To be truly effective, the CEO—and the Senior Executives for that matter—must care about the organization's people. When care and concern from the very top of the organization are present, everything begins to change.

Believe it or not, employees know the difference between true caring and lip-service. From our experience, true care and concern manifests itself in action. And, when this action takes place, people feel the impact. And, when people feel the impact, the culture takes a turn for the better. And, when the culture improves, the organization begins to set itself apart as an employer of choice. It truly is a virtuous cycle.

But make no mistake, the process started with CEO leadership.

2. Developing the Vision

The second test of leading a healthy company is developing the vision. Literally, the word vision means "to see." In our experience, the vision statement is a relatively concise set of sentences or paragraphs that vividly describe what the CEO sees as the "health future" for the organization. Many times people confuse vision and mission statements. The way we like to think of it is the vision statement describes what the new future will look like once everyone arrives, and the mission statement is a set of steps necessary to take when traveling to the new destination.

One CEO who has painted a very compelling picture of the "health future" for his organization is Howard Weyers. You may be familiar with Mr. Weyers as he is the CEO who went to work on eliminating tobacco use from his organization and, in the process, fired smoking employees who refused to quit.

While not everyone will agree with Mr. Weyers' approach for a healthier workforce, you have to admit that he definitely has a vision for what he wants his company to look like. When you talk with Mr. Weyers, it's evident that his vision is crystal clear. Again, even though you may not agree with his approach, he has successfully passed this test of leadership.

When it comes to leading a healthy company, it is the CEO's responsibility to develop the vision for the organization's new "health future." Indeed, without a clearly defined, desired destination, you can bet that employees will struggle with where they're going on this road to better health. And, if employees struggle because they can't see the leader's vision, you can bet that the overall health status of the organization will not improve.

3. Allocating the Resources

The third test of leading a healthy company is the allocation of resources. Even if the CEO passes the first two tests, but fails to allocate the resources necessary to make sure that the program can meet the health needs of the company's workforce, the wellness initiative is doomed to fail.

When it comes to allocating resources, there are several areas where the CEO should focus their concentration. The first is making sure that the company's wellness program has the appropriate staff in place. This means creating a new position(s) which will require resources around recruitment, salary and benefits. The next resource allocation decision involves establishing the appropriate budget.

In addition to staffing and program budgets, the CEO will also need to consider the physical space necessary to house the wellness initiative. For some smaller companies, it may only consist of a modest amount of square footage. For larger companies, this allocation decision may include building new structures that will be dedicated to improving employee health.

Finally, when it comes to resource allocation, the CEO will also have to determine how much time employees will need to successfully take advantage of the company's wellness offerings. And while CEOs often address the first three resource allocation decisions brilliantly, this is where many stumble. However, we have learned that employees will need to have release time in order to participate.

4. Communicating the Importance

The fourth test of leading a healthy company is communication. This test of leadership is a critical component if the organization is truly to change the culture. To be effective, the CEO must communicate a lot. Luckily, there are a variety of channels that can be leveraged to create communications campaigns within any type of company.

The first and, perhaps most basic, way that the CEO can communicate the importance of wellness to the rest of the organization is through written correspondence. Specifically, these can take the form of emails, letters, memos, and other company publications. In our experience in working with healthy companies, written communication from the CEO is very important. However, there are other more effective forms of communication that are at the CEOs disposal. If

the CEO is a gifted communicator, one particularly powerful form of communication is the verbal presentation. Indeed, we have seen a number of CEOs shine using this tactic.

Although often overlooked, another particularly effective form of communication is integrated wellness into the company's strategic plan. By doing this, the CEO has made it clear to the rest of the organization that wellness is to be taken seriously by everyone. What's particularly powerful about using this tactic is that wellness will work its way into meetings and gatherings within the organization at virtually every level.

Finally, wellness can be communicated within an organization by formally incorporating it into the vision/mission statement of the company. In our experience, this is the highest and most impressive form of communication that CEO can take. This is true because it generally takes a lot of effort in order to position wellness within the strategic functioning of the company. When a CEO utilizes this form of communication, they are telling the world that wellness is part of the company's identity.

If the leader is looking to create a best-in-class workplace wellness program, communication is a critical part of the mix.

5. Setting the Example

The fifth test of leading a healthy company is role-modeling or setting a positive example. Without question, this is where the rubber meets the road. Over the last 10 years, we've seen CEOs pass the previously mentioned tests with flying colors, and yet, when it comes to role-modeling, they want nothing to do with it. This is the kiss of death.

In fact, by refusing to accept the responsibility for leading by example, many CEOs are branded as hypocrites in that they want their employees to engage in certain health promoting behaviors, but are unwilling to do it themselves.

What's particularly interesting about role-modeling is that we found, to be effective, the CEO doesn't have to be a tri-athlete, marathoner, or health Nazi—all they have to be is sincere. To be sure, we've seen CEOs who have been admired and respected for their efforts in quitting smoking, losing weight, and becoming physically active.

Time and time and time again, we've found that walking the talk is one of the hallmarks of leading a healthy company. Even though a CEO may choose to take on all of the other tests, they can't escape taking on this one.

6. Distributing The Responsibility

The final test of leading a healthy company is distributing the responsibility for wellness throughout the organization. The reason that it's so important to empower other executives, managers, and frontline employees is to ensure that wellness is embraced and adopted throughout all levels of the company. In so doing, the CEO is ensuring that wellness will continue to remain a part of the fabric of the company for years to come—even if the CEO leaves.

In our journey in helping companies to build best-in-class wellness programs, we have come across numerous CEOs who have taken this responsibility to heart. Perhaps one of the best jobs we've seen is that of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska's President and CEO, Steve Martin. Wanting to ensure that wellness remains a long-term priority at BCBSNE, Steve has appointed teams at multiple levels. From a strategic perspective, Mr. Martin has formally appointed the company's seven Vice Presidents and Chief Medical Officer to oversee all aspects of the company's wellness initiative. To further ensure that the notion of wellness is taken seriously, Steve has carved out metrics that have been incorporated into the company's Balanced Scorecard approach.

At the tactical level, Steve has also created a company-wide wellness committee. BCBSNE's wellness committee consists of many frontline employees. Wellness committee members have been charged with delivering and monitoring the success of the company's wellness program at the grassroots level.

If that's not enough, Steve has also hired a Wellness Administrator as well as a Health Promotion Coordinator to serve under the Vice President of Wellness.

By taking this approach, Steve has left little doubt that wellness will remain an important part of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska for years to come.

About WELCOA

WELCOA (The Wellness Council of America) is one of the nation's most-respected resources for building high-performing, healthy workplaces. Over its 25+ year history, WELCOA has perfected its patented Well Workplace protocol which is the key to developing, delivering, and sustaining a healthy corporate culture. Whether you are a workplace wellness practitioner, human resources professional, business leader, or consultant/broker, WELCOA's tools, training, and resources will help you better promote organizational well-being and, at the same time, contain escalating health care costs.

With more than 5,000 corporate members, WELCOA has an impeccable reputation for helping business and health professionals improve employee well-being and create healthier organizational cultures. By translating powerful, evidence-based science into strategic business practices, WELCOA offers everything you'll need to build and sustain a results-oriented workplace wellness program. Visit Welcoa.org for more information.