

Communication Is Key

Work to Meet Your Employees Where They Are



Candace Shaffer

Whether you're working with a small or large population of employees, engagement in wellness programs can be difficult to gain or maintain. From an employer's perspective, wellness initiatives can help decrease absenteeism and presenteeism, increase productivity, and improve employees' and their families' quality of life.

This can all lead to higher workplace satisfaction and overall employee engagement. We've all read that. From an employee vantage point, wellness is a very personal thing – it's their body, their family's health and it's their employer attempting to tell them how to make life choices typically outside of the workplace. While we tend to spend more hours with our co-workers than not, many people do not want the influence of their employer to spill into their personal lives.

The traditional advice for wellness program strategies includes things such as starting at the top with a C-suite sponsor, know your employees want to start to change and make it easy for them. While these are still important things to consider, there are several other items to include.

Know your stakeholders

Implementing and getting any new benefit program off the ground can be daunting – what is the benefit, how does it work, will it cost the employee or the employer, how do we communicate it to the appropriate audience? The list of questions goes on and on. Knowing your audience is key when thinking about a wellness program, whether it's lunch-and-learn events, wellness coaching or a full on-site clinic operation.

Employers need to know and identify whom the key groups of employees are who should have input on a program – before, during and after implementation. In a university setting such as Purdue, we have several key staff committees, a health care committee and leadership teams that are engaged to provide our team feedback on our ideas for wellness programs, test things out through program demos and even act as an extension of our team when programs are introduced to the population.

These groups can become critical as you move forward with any wellness initiative, especially if they are part of the process from the beginning. Over time, they can learn and understand the logic behind programming, outcomes and the need for engagement; therefore, becoming your biggest advocates.

Ask your audience

In addition to having stakeholders involved, your audience needs to have opportunities to weigh in on what programs they may be asked to participate in. We know that if you don't meet your employees where they are with their own health, engagement in a wellness program is the least of your worries. We want them to be motivated to maintain their health or make changes to improve their life, which includes acknowledging the

importance of their choices related to their health and well-being.

As experts in benefits or wellness, it's easy to fall into the silo of "we know best" or "our data says employees are overweight, therefore we need a weight loss program," but employees just don't willingly engage in programs simply because we said they should.

Employers need to take the time to listen to their employees. Annual surveys can be an easy way to ask employees where they are with their own health, capture a base-level read on how employees understand aspects of wellness (physical, behavioral, social) or gauge their thoughts on current program offerings. Of course, asking is the easy part; getting the answers, analyzing them and taking action can sometimes be difficult, but it is such an important part in the process.

In 2019, we reviewed our annual survey and published a one-page action response indicating what we learned from the employee feedback, as well as what we planned to do in response to that feedback. This action not only communicated to our employees that we were listening, but it set an action plan for our team to work toward improving our programs.

Make changes when and where you can

Whether you ask for feedback on an ongoing basis, engage stakeholders throughout the year or only do an annual survey, responding to the feedback can make or break a wellness program. Employers need to listen and act upon the feedback that they receive from their employees. This may mean slowing down the rollout of a new initiative, engaging in a pilot program where results can then be shared with the employee population or removing an offering altogether.

Employers have to admit their mistakes, or misreading when they happen, and then communicate with the employees as to why a program has changed. Be responsive and then educate when a program is doing well, using the data and outcomes you have.

Engaging each other – your team, your stakeholders and the employees you serve – along the path sets the foundation to position your organization to meet the needs of those you serve simply by asking, listening and responding to what you hear in a proactive manner.

Each year the foundation becomes more stable by continuing to include different perspectives, as well as restructuring along the way when needed. From there, you are able to create an overarching platform of programs and offerings sculpted from the diverse needs and wants of your audience.

AUTHORS: Candace Shaffer is director of benefits and Michelle Lobody, senior communications specialist at Purdue University. Learn more at www.purdue.edu/hr/benefits. Purdue was one of five Wellness Council of Indiana 5-Star AchieveWELL award recipients in 2019