

The image features a large, close-up portrait of a smiling man with short brown hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, holding a clear plastic water bottle. In the background, a group of five business professionals (three men and two women) are smiling and standing together. The background is a light blue gradient with white curved lines. The text 'MANAGEMENT SUPPORT' is overlaid in a large, white, sans-serif font, and the tagline 'Inspiring wellness leadership' is below it in a smaller, italicized font.

# MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

*Inspiring wellness leadership*

*Healthcare consumerism refers to employees being informed and actively engaged in selecting, using, and paying for health benefits and services, as with any other purchase, instead of being passive recipients.<sup>1,2</sup> This accountability is a key to cost management.*

The link connecting employee health behaviors, healthcare costs, and the bottom line has never been more compelling. In today's marketplace, employers are seeking sustainable ways to reduce expenses while recruiting and retaining a committed, productive workforce.

Offering worksite health promotion programs is a common strategy for addressing these human capital issues. Well-designed, evidence-based programs are proven to lower healthcare costs, boost employee health and productivity, and promote healthcare consumerism.

Management support is critical to the success of any wellness initiative.<sup>3,4</sup> Studies show that management style<sup>5</sup> and perception of management support<sup>6</sup> are strong influences on participation in employer-sponsored health promotion programs. But support for wellness policies and programming often varies by management level and individual. Yet effective leadership is a top driver of employee engagement, which in turn is a requirement for business success.<sup>7</sup>

This paper focuses on how managers can leverage their roles to support workplace wellness initiatives, drive participation, inspire personal responsibility, and promote a culture of health.

*A study of 1047 managers from 26 different companies found senior managers are more likely than line supervisors to believe wellness programs would help reduce healthcare costs. Middle managers are more likely than senior managers to believe cost and lack of management interest are barriers to wellness programs.<sup>8</sup>*

## Employee Well-Being — **A Smart Investment**

**For any organization, each employee represents a significant investment of resources:**

- Civilian employers spend an average of \$29.31 on total compensation per employee per hour worked, with \$8.89 per employee per hour — or 30% — spent on benefits.<sup>9</sup>
- Employer-sponsored health premiums for family coverage have increased by 131% over the past decade.<sup>10</sup>
- Employer costs for healthcare are increasing by a median rate of 6% or more each year.<sup>11</sup>
- On average, each dependent costs employers \$1780 a year.<sup>12</sup>
- Replacing an employee costs anywhere from a total of several thousand dollars to thousands of dollars per day.<sup>13</sup>

**The return on investment from human capital is determined in large part by worker well-being:**

- Physical well-being has a strong influence on job satisfaction, mood, and general happiness.<sup>14</sup>
- Job stress and work-family conflicts are associated with direct (absenteeism, employer healthcare costs) and indirect (job dissatisfaction) effects on organization performance.<sup>15</sup>
- Participation in a workplace wellness program is associated with lower absenteeism and higher job satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>
- According to the American Institute on Stress, workplace stress costs US businesses over \$300 billion annually, or \$7500 per worker each year.<sup>17</sup>
- As employees gain weight, healthcare costs go up — 1.9% for every unit increase (5-8 pounds) in BMI.<sup>18</sup>



# LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Making a measurable difference in employee well-being requires more than lip service and stopgap measures like onsite yoga classes or annual lectures on heart health. Fundamental changes in corporate policy and culture — backed by commitment from all leadership levels — are the cornerstones. Today's high-performing companies are not only seizing comprehensive health promotion programs as core business strategies, but are building in leadership accountability for supporting wellness initiatives and driving participation.<sup>19,20</sup>

Managers wield a powerful influence over employee morale, workloads, team communication norms, and job satisfaction. Because of their positions, they can serve as motivators and role models to promote healthy behaviors and participation — resulting in decreased healthcare and turnover costs as well as increased productivity.

As company leaders, managers must give health promotion the high priority of other key strategies — the language used to describe it and policies to support it should parallel customer service, recruiting/retention, and quality.

Multiple studies show positive links between manager support and employee well-being; consider these findings.

**Reduces health risks.** A study of over 3000 healthy Swedish men shows that workers who rate their managers as good leaders are less likely to have a heart attack or die from heart disease over the next 10 years.<sup>21</sup> Manager behaviors contributing to well-being include communicating clear objectives and accurate information, plus allowing sufficient employee control over responsibilities.

**Influences weight control.** Visible management support may promote weight control. In a study of healthcare workers, perception of high corporate commitment to employee health is associated with lower BMI.<sup>22</sup>

**Decreases stress, raises job satisfaction.** Occupational and environmental research reveals a strong relationship between job satisfaction and physical as well as mental health.<sup>23</sup> Job satisfaction factors may include hours of work, organization management style, workload, and level of autonomy — elements that also affect employee stress level.

**Boosts participation.** A study of employees in 10 federal agencies finds increased participation in wellness programs where coworkers endorse the programs; manager support for the programs is related to participation.<sup>24</sup>

**Fosters retention.** Employees may be more likely to remain with the organization and committed to their jobs when managers are supportive of work and family roles — such as acknowledging the fact employees have a life outside of work.<sup>25</sup>

**Increases engagement.** According to a Towers Perrin report, when managers recognize strong employee performance, engagement goes up by nearly 60%.<sup>26</sup>



## First Things First

To succeed, a worksite wellness program needs a strong foundation—based not only on innovation and evidence-based components, but also on policies and accountability that confirm management support. Managers need preparation to give full support. And wellness needs to be embedded into all functions.

Talk is cheap, and employees know it. Putting these basics into place shows everyone that the organization is serious about workers' health and welfare.

**Policies.** Clear policies communicate expectations as well as procedures and resources. HR policies on tobacco use, lactation support, health risk assessment participation, flexible scheduling, and worksite nutrition (food services, vending machine stock) are examples for a healthy work environment. Vendor/health plan management policies ensure that contracts are being met and that employees receive the quality of products/services the employer is paying for.

**Accountability.** Manager charisma isn't enough to uphold interest in a health promotion program. Employees see right through disingenuous messages and behavior. Supervisors at all levels must be held responsible and rewarded for wellness policy compliance and support of initiatives as part of their performance evaluations. Accountability reflects leadership commitment.<sup>28</sup>

**Preparation.** Before managers can meet expectations for fully supporting wellness initiatives, they need knowledge, tools, and resources. They also need time to learn about the program, communicate it to staff, and implement any changes required to bring their departments on board. Health promoters must not assume that managers are knowledgeable and confident about health promotion. Special training sessions and clear, concise materials (summaries, tip sheets, key messages) as well as easy access to staff resources are ways to bring managers up to speed. Trial participations can give managers first-hand experience with wellness services—along with visibility.

*Blue-collar workers who smoke are more likely to quit and stay nonsmokers after participation in a worksite tobacco cessation program if tobacco use policies are in place and workplace dusts, fumes, vapors, and other inhaled contaminants are controlled.<sup>27</sup>*

**Integration.** Embedding health promotion in each aspect of organization structure — from meeting norms to maintenance — bolsters the effectiveness of wellness efforts. Existing functions relevant to employee health and well-being should be integrated,<sup>29</sup> such as safety, ergonomics, benefits, leave of absence, and disability; all have a stake in wellness. Seeking input from these teams and their leadership will foster buy-in to health promotion services. Streamlining wellness functions and standardizing key messages across departments also contribute to operational success. For example, adding agenda items to new hire orientations, manager training, staff meetings, and vendor/health plan relationships will create opportunities to communicate and reinforce wellness as a strategic priority.

## Supporting Health and Wellness

Managers who connect with employees — establishing good rapport and healthy communication norms — are more effective than those who don't. Developing a sincere interest in individuals and ability to promote positive feelings in the work team is vitally important in garnering cooperation.<sup>30</sup> Policies that support interpersonal and communication skills among managers help set the stage for a healthier work environment. In fact, the Partnership for Prevention recommends that managers receive training in both leadership and stress management.<sup>31</sup>

Everyone appreciates support and encouragement. The workplace climate established by policies, coworker behavior, and leadership styles affects employee well-being — physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Managers who facilitate wellness program participation — along with teamwork, job autonomy, vacation time, appropriate use of sick leave, and access to work/life/health benefits — help create an atmosphere where employees can thrive. Conversely, those who always work after-hours and never take vacations imply that employees are expected to follow suit. Managers who exercise on lunch breaks, participate in wellness events, promote good nutrition, and keep team workloads and stress levels manageable cultivate a workplace that values good health.

When it comes to promoting worksite wellness, how the message is delivered is just as important as the content — the presence of visible, consistent managerial commitment speaks volumes.

*Workers who experience high levels of supervisor support and work team cohesion report less on-the-job stress and greater job satisfaction.<sup>32</sup>*

## Conclusions

- Promoting employee well-being through support at all levels of leadership — strengthened by policies, accountability, preparation, and integrating wellness into all functions — helps protect your investment in human capital.
- Numerous studies show the positive impact of manager support on employee health, wellness program participation, job satisfaction, retention — and ultimately, cost savings.
- Holding managers responsible for supporting health promotion policies and initiatives should be a standard part of performance evaluation. Managers who visibly participate in and endorse wellness activities, serving as role models and cultivating a healthy work environment, should be rewarded.

## Management Support Ideas

1. Make sure all health promotion initiatives and campaigns are well thought out and executed flawlessly. A poorly planned program erodes employee and manager opinion of wellness programs, decreasing the likelihood of future interest or support.
2. Involve managers in policy development and implementation to promote buy-in: tobacco-free workplace, flexible scheduling, lactation support, reducing workplace stress, healthy food offerings, stretch and walk breaks, health risk assessment participation, etc.
3. Shape behavior by linking employee and personal wellness participation, support, and policy compliance to manager performance evaluations.
4. Provide interpersonal skill development training and coaching at all management levels to help leaders become more effective in supporting business initiatives, including health promotion.
5. Establish a year-round health and wellness communication plan, coordinating messages with other vehicles (benefit materials, internal publications, etc.) and social networking tools. Give managers a preview of any events or initiatives before announcing them to employees — along with handy reference tools. Everyone is more supportive of programs they understand.
6. Identify wellness role models — those who already lead active, healthy lifestyles — among all levels of leadership and personally ask them to make an extra effort in championing the program.
7. Ask executives, managers, and front-line supervisors to inspire employees by sharing success stories, informally or formally, and visibly participating in onsite wellness campaigns. Having them set an example is valuable testimony to increase credibility and strengthen program image.
8. Videotape the CEO or other leaders introducing and endorsing wellness initiatives and programs. Embed the video clip in a broadcast email and/or post it on the intranet.
9. Ensure vendor/health plan alignment with wellness initiatives through training, sharing materials as appropriate, monitoring quality of services, and tracking referrals to worksite wellness programs.
10. Leverage external resources for hosting manager and employee Q&A sessions, teleconferences, and webinars. For example, health plans are invested in reducing costs, and often eager to partner with management teams to reach employees. Local businesses and agencies also may be interested.
11. Link employee wellness efforts to organization success. Financial summaries and trending data will show the savings that result from healthy behaviors and healthcare consumerism. When managers share this data, employees can see that their decisions and behaviors make a difference.
12. Teach managers stress reduction techniques so they can model them and share them with employees. Examples include regular breaks during long meetings or throughout the day and relaxation breathing.
13. Urge managers to inspire employees by recognizing wellness achievements and thanking them for their efforts toward becoming more savvy healthcare consumers.
14. Help managers encourage employees to use sick time appropriately, take advantage of flexible scheduling, use vacation time, access work/life/health benefits, and participate in wellness offerings.
15. Conduct periodic employee and manager focus groups and surveys to gather insight on wellness barriers, innovative ideas, feedback on manager support, and program success.

## Resources

- American Institute of Stress ([www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org))
- American Journal of Health Behavior ([www.ajhb.org](http://www.ajhb.org))
- American Journal of Health Promotion ([www.healthpromotionjournal.com](http://www.healthpromotionjournal.com))
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))
- Harvard Business Review ([hbr.harvardbusiness.org](http://hbr.harvardbusiness.org))
- Health Education & Behavior ([heb.sagepub.com](http://heb.sagepub.com))
- Health Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/hea](http://www.apa.org/journals/hea))
- Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation ([www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org))
- Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine ([www.joem.org](http://www.joem.org))
- Journal of Occupational Health Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/ocp](http://www.apa.org/journals/ocp))
- Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology ([www.humankinetics.com/jsep](http://www.humankinetics.com/jsep))
- Journal of the American Medical Association ([www.jama.ama-assn.org](http://www.jama.ama-assn.org))
- Journal of Vocational Behavior ([www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb))
- Mercer Health & Benefits Consulting ([www.mercer.com](http://www.mercer.com))
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ([www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh))
- The New England Journal of Medicine ([content.nejm.org](http://content.nejm.org))
- Occupational and Environmental Medicine ([oem.bmj.com](http://oem.bmj.com))
- Partnership For Prevention ([www.prevent.org](http://www.prevent.org))
- Social Science & Medicine ([www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed))
- Society of Human Resource Management ([www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org))
- Towers Perrin ([www.towersperrin.com](http://www.towersperrin.com))
- Watson Wyatt Worldwide ([www.watsonwyatt.com](http://www.watsonwyatt.com))



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## End Notes

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