

Wellness Champions Networks

A Best Practice Resource for Workplace Wellness Programs

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INTRODUCTION

A recent article in *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*[®] presented a set of nine best practice design principles for worksite wellness programs (4). These nine design principles were based on 44 best practices identified through a review of scientific articles, industry reports, consensus statements, and expert perspectives. Furthermore, the nine design principles were subsequently associated with highly successful programs. An in-depth presentation of the 10-year journey that propelled the Turck Corporation in Minneapolis to one of the healthiest companies in the United States showed alignment of their *LifeWorks@Turck* program with these design principles (5). Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania deployed the nine best practice design principles and, in a 3-year period, went from having no coordinated wellness program to being recognized as one of the top 100 healthiest employers in the United States. The wellness program leaders concluded that the use of the best practice design principles allowed for quick success and accelerated progress toward the envisioned future of a culture that embraces wellness as an essential facet of life (3). Workplace wellness leaders at Indiana University deliberately and prospectively applied the best practice design principles to a fundamental “redesign” of Indiana University’s worksite wellness program. The newly designed “Healthy Change” program documented 15% risk reduction in its second year and was so well received by employees that the evaluation noted a 100% “would recommend to others” satisfaction rating (2). These observations provide further support for the use of best practice program design principles. This article is focused on one of those best practices, namely, Wellness Champion Networks.

WELLNESS CHAMPIONS

One highly visible well-recognized best practice for workplace wellness programs is the engagement of wellness champions. Wellness champions appear at every level of the company and often are intrinsically motivated to take on the role of being a champion. Whether formally or informally assigned to this role, champions are considered an important social support to others and have a powerful voice among all employees. Wellness champion-related efforts are noted as a best practice under the “engagement” design principle because of its importance in



peer-level support for wellness and leadership-level provision of permission for workers to engage in the workplace wellness programs. However, wellness champions also are related to other best practice design principles. For example, wellness champions play an important role in participatory practices to ensure the “voice of the employee” is reflected in decision making — an example of the partnership principle. Arguably, wellness champions play a role in every one of the design principles because people are at the heart of all efforts that make the program go. The Table presents examples and suggestions that relate each best practice design principle to wellness champion roles.

LEADERSHIP AND WELLNESS CHAMPIONS

A strategic approach to recognizing the leadership role that wellness champions play involves the relationships among the

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TABLE: Workplace Wellness Program Best Practice Design Principles, Descriptions, and Wellness Champion Roles

Best Practice Design Principles	Brief Description of the Principles	Examples of the Role of the Wellness Champion
Leadership	Design elements that set program vision, set organizational policy, ensure resources, support implementation, and connect the program to business goals. Leadership should be engaged at multiple levels of the organization.	Be visible, actively involved, and engage in two-way communications with frontline and executive leaders.
Relevance	Design elements that address factors critical to participation and employee engagement. Participatory approaches should be promoted.	Be the voice of employees and let their interests and needs be known.
Partnership	Design elements that relate to efforts that integrate the program with other people and entities including employees, unions, external vendor companies, community organizations, among others.	Work together with frontline staff, management, and executive leadership as well as with any outside vendor providing services for the wellness program. Be most actively engaged and refer to the program in a positive manner.
Comprehensiveness	Design elements that address health education, supportive social and physical environments, integration of the worksite program into the organization's structure, linkage to related programs, and worksite screening programs.	Be sure to be knowledgeable about the program options available to people. Provide feedback to wellness program staff on what participants are experiencing.
Implementation	Design elements that ensure a planned, coordinated, and fully executed work plan and process tracking system. Action plan execution matters.	Be responsible for tasks that communicate program options, deliver key messages, and be sure to note gaps in optimal execution of the program.
Engagement	Design elements that promote an ongoing connection between employees and the program through actions that create respect, trust, and an overall culture of health and well-being. Experience as an important predictor for long-term engagement.	As an ambassador of the wellness program, put people first, engage in a relevant manner, and build a culture of trust and respect. Invest in yourself to ensure that you can bring your best self to work and build the best experience for others.
Communications	Design elements that ensure a strategic communications plan that generates a day-to-day presence of the program in the workplace. Communications should be ongoing and engaging.	Make sure to communicate with others using a variety of tools, such as email, huddles, team talks, and posters. Use written, verbal, and visual language and communicate often.
Data-Driven	Design elements that ensure the use of data in measuring, integrating, evaluating, and reporting program evolution and continuous improvement efforts. "Best data available" approaches should be encouraged.	Let people know how the program is doing. Provide reports of how the program is perceived to leaders. Request periodic summaries (dashboards) and updates to maintain interest and visibility to the program.
Compliance	Design elements that ensure that the program meets regulatory requirements, follows ethical standards, and protects personal information of employees and participants.	Be informed on how individual employee data are protected and be willing to discuss it when an issue arises. Provide feedback to leaders when moral, ethical, or legal concerns are raised.

wellness champions, the roles they are being asked to play, and the connections they have to executive leaders, members of wellness, safety, or other committees that provide input into decisions that affect their work. From a wellness program perspective, executive leadership is needed to set a vision for the program and connect well-being goals to the mission of the company. Division and department leaders are important to further disseminate the program's goals across the organization. Frontline leaders are central to driving the program deep into daily operations. This multilevel leadership approach also needs to be multidirectional to ensure that the voice of the employees is heard and that bottom-up efforts are recognized and nurtured. Specifically related to wellness champions and their networks, leadership needs to nurture the intrinsic motivation from which many champions draw their inspiration and energy. The *Tao of Leadership* (see box) represents a powerful guiding concept.

CREATING A NETWORK OF WELLNESS CHAMPIONS

It is clear from the discussion above that wellness champions play an important role in building and sustaining an effective workplace well-being program. To do so intentionally, a

The Tao of Leadership

Go to the people.
 Live with them.
 Love them.
 Learn from them.
 Start with what they know.
 Build on what they know.
 But of the best leaders
 When their task is accomplished
 The work is done
 The people will all say
 We have done it ourselves.
 — Lao Tzo

WORKSITE HEALTH PROMOTION



strategic approach to creating an effective Wellness Champions Network is required. Fundamentally, the idea is to design an environment in which individuals are connected to a larger group through which they find support and continue to be energized. For a network to thrive, there needs to be unfettered access to people, information, input, and feedback. At the same time, the network needs to be strategically linked to the goals and objectives of the wellness program so it has a good chance of being successful at its mission. Hence, in creating a Wellness Champions Network, the network's topology, structure, or shape needs to be considered and cannot be left to emerge by chance. In fact, naturally occurring, organic, and continually evolving social networks, such as those among people living in the same apartment complex, have a different structure than organized networks, such as the department's telephone tree designed to get emergency messages from the leader to every employee. Recognition of the differences is important, although both types occur simultaneously in the workplace setting because of the fact that each person who acts as a wellness champion is also a member of a department, division, or other social unit within the company. Organic networks are complex and constantly changing, whereas organized networks are simpler in structure (1). For the purpose of optimizing the roles wellness champions play within the company, an intentional effort to use both types of networks can pay major dividends in affecting the culture of the company.

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL WELLNESS CHAMPIONS NETWORK

From a practical perspective, what are the building blocks of a high-performance successful Wellness Champions Network? Given that a Wellness Champions Network is one part of a comprehensive multicomponent and multilevel program, we have outlined here a set of practices that will be needed to build a network but fully recognize that many other programmatic elements will have impact on the design and the performance of the overall network. Wellness Champions Network building blocks we would like to highlight include:

- *Purpose* — volunteer champions will expect their time to be used efficiently and effectively. They want to contribute in a positive manner and be useful in the effort. Job descriptions may be used to provide clarity for both the champions as well as their supervisor about the expectations. In addition, job descriptions may make it clear how to align their time commitment and ability or expertise to the role they are being asked to commit to.
- *Time* — being a member of the Wellness Champions Network will involve time. Often, it will involve time spent on activities during the course of the day in competition with primary duties. Therefore, explicit approval is needed from their direct leader. Furthermore, as approvals are provided, the people leaders need to be able to communicate why the investment of time matters to them, not just to the employee. Once again, the job description will help the people leader understand the expectations.
- *Support* — effective champions have engaged leaders who actively participate. In some cases, incentives or rewards are available for management when certain process or health outcomes are achieved. The champion will especially be effective when he or she can select a partner who can be a backup for instances where primary responsibilities supersede.
- *Training* — as champions are expected to be an information source about the program, may be expected to recruit others, and be aware of any changes being made to the program, onboarding and ongoing training are an important component of the network. Helping champions learn and practice the “stairwell” (not elevator!) speech and be familiar with frequently asked questions (FAQs) will empower them from the start with their primary responsibility.
- *Information* — the network should be designed to provide ongoing frequent updates communicated in an easily shareable format (flyers, emails, talking points, templates to use for distribution, etc.).
- *Inspiration* — the network should be managed in a manner that provides inspiration to the champions. This may be facilitated by connecting the fruits of their labor to the outcomes of the entire program. In addition, it may be achieved by ensuring easy access to other champions on a day-to-day basis as well as by providing examples of successes, case studies, and best practices.
- *Tools* — champions need to gain access to tools that allow them to be successful. First and foremost, this means clear instructions on what to do and how to do it, including requests for action with associated preferred outcomes. Examples of tools include kits for hosting events, scripts and supporting visuals for presentations, guides for nutritious food choices at meetings, and tips for getting people to participate in brief health exercises.
- *Accountability* — Champions need to be held accountable for the work they do, and therefore, clear goals and expectations found in a job description are needed. Optimally, process measures that reflect the work done and dashboards that provide overall status may be used to both report on progress as well as inform about potential issues that need to be addressed.
- *Recognition* — celebrate success! Showcase both the people and the work!

CONCLUSIONS

A properly designed Wellness Champions Network is regarded as an important best practice for workplace wellness programs. Wellness champions should be supported in their roles, receive clear work direction, and have an ability to express their insights in the form of feedback mechanisms that are built into the network design. The success of wellness champions, as well as the effectiveness of the network to which they belong, heavily depends on leadership setting clear goals, providing clear direction, and access to training, technical assistance, and tools that support the work.

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