

The Coaching Advantage:

Adding Coaching Power to Your Wellness Program

If healthcare costs continue to rise at the current rate, we can expect an average annual healthcare cost of \$28,530 per employee by the year 2019!¹ **Wellness programs are no longer an option – they are a necessity.** And the businesses that offer them are enjoying a truly significant ROI. (Averaging \$3-5:1.²) But despite the progress, many traditional wellness programs are not effective enough. They are more like band-aids and pills, aimed at slowing particular symptoms, but not at addressing the underlying causes. And they are missing the even greater opportunity – the chance to go beyond reducing health care costs to improving productivity, energy and focus, to increasing access to brilliance, innovation, engagement, and well-being in the company's greatest resource – it's employees. We need to ramp up the power – in the most cost productive way possible.

70-90% of the diseases that are sinking the healthcare ship – obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and depression – are actually **preventable with lifestyle changes**. Our current crisis is not the result of a shortage of access to medical care, nor a shortage of health information, but a shortage of healthy habits. The greatest potential for decreasing the burden and increasing the ROI lies in empowering employees to make lasting lifestyle changes – so they *don't need* medical care.

But changing behaviors is inherently hard – really, really hard, complex, and very personal. Dr. Ed Miller of Johns Hopkins reports that only 10% of heart bypass patients change their lifestyle habits despite their high-level risk of death!³ Knowing “what” to change is clearly not enough to motivate change. Much of the problem lies in the fact that many people do not really *believe* they can succeed, and naturally are resistant to facing yet another failure. No wonder participation in wellness programs is so low. Also, quite frequently, the targeted unhealthy habits are actually a result of seemingly unrelated issues. Weight gain can be caused by sleep problems, stress, or depression. No diet and exercise program can create lasting results or lifestyle changes until the underlying causes are addressed. Stress alone is estimated to be costing US businesses \$300 billion year.⁴ It complicates all disease processes, increases average health care costs 46%,⁵ and markedly interferes with productivity. Yet, despite the fact that 40% of workers⁶ and 88% of managers⁷ report that their jobs are very stressful, stress is seldom addressed in wellness programming.

Effectively changing behaviors in a group setting requires innovative, comprehensive, systems-based approaches that still respect and support each individual participant. Adding health coaching can provide this much-needed personal connection, ramping up the power of the wellness initiative and increasing the ROI.

How Health Coaching Works:

Health coaches work with individuals or groups to engage them in the possibility of change, to define achievable goals, design strategies to overcome obstacles, provide accountability and resources, and to empower them to take the appropriate steps to reach their goals. The model is well established in sports and in business, and is producing powerful results in healthcare.⁸ Health coaching has grown exponentially in the last decade as the behavioral sciences and neurosciences have provided the tools and techniques to better understand and support behavior change. The methodology of coaching works with our natural brain patterns to break through resistance and support learning new habits.

Most everyone knows something he or she could be doing or not doing to be healthier, happier, or more productive. But changing an ingrained habit is hard, so we avoid trying, or we try and fail – reinforcing our perceived lack of self-efficacy. Coaches are trained to understand these processes and use specific motivational techniques, to co-create strategies based in the individual's values and strengths, and guide the steps to success.

The Coaching Advantage:

1. Increases engagement – The number one complaint in wellness programming is lack of engagement, often as low as 10% completing the HRA. This number only increases moderately with the traditional “carrot and stick” reward models, because these methods are not intrinsically motivating,⁹ and they are not strong enough to overcome the deep avoidance and denial surrounding poor lifestyle choices. Coaches act as advocates, easing the process and the fear surrounding it, and tapping into each individual’s intrinsic motivation to want to make changes for themselves.

Another pitfall in wellness programming is that already overwhelmed employees perceived the plan as just one more mandate from above, or just one more stressor on their already full plates. Coaches are client-centered and shift the focus to *supporting* the employees. This can boost morale and increase engagement. (Engagement further increases if leadership models willing involvement.¹⁰)

2. Shifts responsibility to employee – One of the most common complaints in business and in medicine is a lack of personal responsibility. This lack of accountability and “learned helplessness” fuels our healthcare crisis. Coach approaches very specifically shift the responsibility back to the client. Coaches do not tell the employee what to do - they help the employee want to do it for his/herself. Guided through the process of goal setting and creating proactive obstacle strategies, the employee experiences the small steps of success that reclaim his/her self-efficacy to drive future choices. This is often one of the most rewarding parts of coaching, one that can spill into increased self-efficacy on the job.

3. Individualizes the program to the employee – This is key. Lifestyle behaviors are very complex and personal, as are disease processes. As mentioned above, one symptom, such as weight gain, can occur for myriad of reasons, causing a one-size-fits-all program to miss the mark for many. The coach has the opportunity to dig under the measured health risk or symptom to the specific causes for that individual, often helping the client gain awareness of those seemingly unrelated issues, and design specific strategies for his/her situation.

The coach also has the opportunity to address each employee’s specific obstacles or roadblocks. Every employee comes to the wellness program with a different situation, and any successful, lasting behavior change must be customized to work in real life. Trying to “psych-up” a divorced mother of a sick child to participate in the company 5k just adds to her stress. Instead, helping her find 15-minute increments in her harried day to dance to some funky music or do some activity she loves will decrease her stress, increase her metabolism and mood, and aid her ability to focus and engage at work.

4. Clarifies values and strengths – Coaches are trained to help their clients clearly identify their values and strengths, and to use these to guide their personal strategies. Again, this taps one of the key components of intrinsic motivation – connection to purpose.¹² Connecting to core values and strengths is empowering in all aspects of behavior, life and business. Having a work team complete simple values and strengths exercises has been shown to increase positivity and productivity.¹³ And, mindfully making behavior choices based on values increases health and happiness.

5. Tackles the resistance to change – Resistance is also complex and personal, as well as cultural. Often the underlying causes of this resistance to change have been affecting work performance as well. Coaching techniques dig under this “immunity to change”¹³ - the fears, the mindsets, and the underlying assumptions – to the causes of the resistance. By raising client awareness and helping clients design proactive paths around the obstacles, the coach supports the clients as they take the steps to break through the resistance. This raises self-confidence and self-efficacy.

6. Addresses issues in systems approach – Health coaches take a systems approach looking at the interrelatedness of symptoms, stressors, life challenges, and work situations. Everything in life is a system – from our cells to our bodies, to our families and businesses, to the universe. Adjusting one part of that system affects all other parts. You cannot increase production without beefing up shipping and sales. You cannot change behaviors as if they are stand-alone issues. Coaches help the client see the whole picture and integrate workable changes.

7. Empowers with pragmatic strategies – By individualizing the goals and strategies, coaches empower the client to move forward. Coaches guide clients to make SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Reasonable, and Time-anchored. This shifts wellness goals from nebulous, possibly unattainable dreams, sabotaged by all-or-nothing mentalities, procrastination, and other avoidance and denial mindsets, to easily achievable steps. SMART goals increase the odds of success fueling future successes. Again, this results in powerful experiential learning of self-efficacy and personal accountability.

8. Cultivates positive mindset – The scientific evidence is overwhelming that *mindset is the most important part of success* – being open and believing in the possibility of success is just as necessary for change as is practice. No parent or coach would send a 5-year-old onto the soccer field without helping her believe she could win. Visualization and positive rehearsals actually change brain wiring and chemistry to support growth and behavior change. Coaches use specific techniques to encourage more positive mindsets. This process increases chances of success, as well as builds resilience for future obstacles. Positivity is also the stress antidote.¹⁴

Cultivating positive mindsets is important for creating healthy behaviors and healthy businesses. Happy employees are more productive employees. 20 years of rigorous research has shown that a ratio of positive to negative thoughts of 3:1 is crucial not only for the personal happiness that fuels success, but this same ratio of positive to negative interactions in the workplace predicts business success.¹⁵ Promoting more open, curious, appreciative mindsets fosters the collaboration, creativity, innovation and resilience required to compete in today's market.

How to Incorporate Health Coaching

Many scenarios exist for integrating health coaching – from intensive onsite, in-house coaches, to telephonic models or any combination. The planning and set up can determine both reception and engagement. The first step is developing very **clear values, mission, and goals** for the program. This guides the strategies, goals and operational policies more efficiently and consistently. Then every introduction, communication, and meeting, is an opportunity to extend the values of employee support and health promotion in a collaborative culture. Leadership can use coaching principles of appreciative inquiry and motivational interviewing in these exchanges to set the tone and expectations, setting the stage for success. Some leaders have chosen happiness and fun as values to incorporate into the program and have enjoyed tremendous response and engagement.¹⁶

Once the program is in place, obtaining positive outcomes depends on two keys: **quality and training of the coaches**, and allocation of sufficient time and resources to support their effectiveness. It seems almost everyone is calling him/herself a “coach” these days, and training programs are popping up everywhere, including “in-house” at insurance corporations and fitness centers. The best health coaches have a solid clinical background, are trained by an ACSM or ICF accredited program, and stay current with continuing education. These accreditation organizations insure standards in education, techniques, and ethics.

One of the most common reasons *any* business initiative fails is that it is not **properly supported, financed, and operationally and culturally integrated**. It must be emotionally safe, and a cultural norm, to participate, and *all* levels of management must support the time allotment and process. Because behavior change is so difficult, effective coaching requires regular coach-client contact to develop relationship, guide behavior, tackle obstacles, provide accountability, and support for the client. Too many companies provide infrequent 15-minute “spot coaching” sessions, then wonder why they are not getting results. This is not a cost-effective approach. Neither is providing a coach, but not the leadership backing, cultural norms or policies to support employee time and effort with the coach. Effective and lasting learning requires rewiring in the brain, and occurs only when motivation is tapped and combined with repeated attention and practice. The pay-offs occur when the employee is supported well enough to empower creation of new brain pathways guiding new, resilient health habits, habits that increase their health and performance capacity.

The keys to adding effective coaching power:

- Strategic planning – clarity of values, mission, goals, guidelines
- Quality coaches with quality supervision
- Adequate resources – time, human resources, and financial resources
- Consistency in delivery, aligning operational policies and communications
- Accountability – measuring frequently and measuring what matters

Coaching is a powerful addition to wellness programming. But it too **must be held accountable**. **Creating a dashboard** of metrics to track is crucial. Many wellness programs have used inappropriate, shortsighted, too stringent or narrow, or just off-the-mark target metrics, missing valuable information that could inform adjustments or enhance outcomes. Metrics provide accountability as well as information to guide continued fine-tuning.

Of course, overall health care costs must be measured, as should pharmacy costs, absenteeism, accident rates, workman's compensation and disability claims. These should be measured at least quarterly, and evaluated with patience. It takes the brain 2-3 months to form a new neural pathway to create a new health habit. It takes longer to see the effects of that health habit on an individual's health, and even longer to see measurable changes in bottom line costs. It takes years to create a disease or disability state and years to reverse it. But this long-term thinking is just what is required to reverse our current trends. Every 5 pounds lost significantly reduces multiple health risks (and pants sizes!)

Measuring specific health outcomes, such as hypertension or obesity rates, as an aggregate is important as well. But care should be taken to structure a program in which individual participants choose which health outcome he/she wishes to set as a goal. *Only by choice or self-determination will intrinsic motivation kick in.* Group goals can be successful, though again, more so if the group participates in the selection process. Employees may choose as a group to lose weight and collaborate to support each other, but the coach should help individuals design personalized strategies. Feedback should also be obtained on the quality of the coaching interaction from both the employees and the coaches. Coaches need to feel supported and well supervised, and employees need to feel the encounter is employee-focused, collaborative, and empowering. Trust is a crucial part of the coach-client dynamic and must be protected.

The dashboard should also include metrics reflecting indirect results of improving engagement and health. Perceived stress, job satisfaction, turnover rates are all useful to track. Because productivity is related to the engagement and health of employees, some measure of productivity is recommended, and must be individualized to the industry and situation. It is also useful to solicit constructive comments and recommendations in an open-ended manner periodically. This reinforces engagement and can yield surprising observations, suggestions, or outcomes. This process also builds community, supporting job satisfaction and health.

Conclusion

Incorporating coaching principles and approaches into wellness programming has the capacity to add power to a wellness program to drive improved outcomes and ROI. Like all successful business initiatives the process should start with clearly identified values, mission, and goals, and then proceed with strategies, policies, supervision and accountabilities to insure quality and return. ***The potential benefits of adding coaching goes far beyond decreasing health costs and increasing productivity, though. The coaching model presents an excellent leadership opportunity - perhaps the most powerful means of influencing the culture and community of the workplace. It can be the critical difference in creating a collaborative, positive, learning environment - one that supports the best potential of each individual and secures the future brilliance of the company.***

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