Employee-Led Wellness Works

Meritus Health is a health care system based in Hagerstown, with 3500 employees. Initially, the company had an employee wellness program that was activity oriented, but they wanted to go a step further and develop a results-oriented program. This was important because Meritus wanted data to support that their wellness programs were actually making a difference—not only for employees’ health, but also for the organization’s financial health. Their program was based on guidance from the Wellness Council of America (WELCOA). A wellness committee was formed to use these benchmarks to lay the foundation for a successful employee wellness program.

The first benchmark is to get CEO support. Meritus was fortunate to have a CEO who supported wellness and actually led by example. He is an avid cyclist, he requested lunch choices of 500 calories or less in the cafeteria, he parks his car in the far lot and “hikes” to work, and he signed the commitment for Meritus to be a Healthiest Business in Maryland. In addition, one of the company’s vice presidents is also a member of the wellness committee.

The second benchmark is to create a wellness team. According to WELCO, health promotion programs work best when employees are involved in the design, planning, promoting, delivering and managing of the program. This structure was helpful in creating a network of employees who could identify wellness issues throughout the health system. The committee members became Wellness Champions.

Meritus at a Glance:

- Type of Business: Health Care System
- Location: Hagerstown
- Number of Employees: 3500
- What Worked: An employee-driven wellness program with multiple options for participation, specific objectives, and measurable results.
- Program Model: Wellness Council of America

Meritus Health’s Gold Medal Employees: They participated in the Summer Olympic Challenge to exercise a minimum of 30 minutes a day for 5 days a week in an Olympic sport of their choice.
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attract the interest of coworkers. Management, as well as frontline employees from key departments, make up the company’s 15-member wellness committee. An employee health management consultant is an ad-hoc member of the wellness team. Their involvement has helped in relationship building with employees. This element of trust is important as the consultant provides Meritus employees with health coaching services.

**The third benchmark is to collect data to drive health efforts.** Meritus offers a health risk assessment (HRA) as well as an employee wellness interest survey every two years. The HRA data is used in an employer summary report, which provides measurement of results and directs the committee’s focus on the health issues that need addressed. Additionally, Meritus continually monitors their medical claims to aid in the strategic decisions necessary for appropriate interventions. Data scorecards are used to communicate the basic outcomes of an initiative to senior management.

**The fourth benchmark is to create an operating plan.** The team reviewed the data from the HRA and employee interest survey and formulated a five-year operating plan that included goals that would meet their employee’s health needs. This assured that everyone was operating on the same page and gave the committee the focus it needed to proceed with meaningful initiatives. The committee reviews the operating plan every two years to see if modifications are needed, after the HRA and employee interest survey results are compiled.

**Benchmark number five is to choose appropriate interventions.** The HRA helped identify the top three areas of health concern for employees, and the interest survey identified the three top wellness interests of employees. The team committed to communicating, educating, participating and evaluating the five identified goals and their initiatives, which were based on employee fitness, weight reduction, resiliency, healthy lifestyles and smoking cessation. The team offered a variety of initiatives for each goal, to entice employees regardless of ability levels.

**The sixth benchmark is to create a supportive environment.** This was done in a variety of ways, such as healthy food choices in the vending machines and cafeteria, smoke-free campus, developing campus walking maps for employees, an on-site gym as well as contracts with neighboring gyms for employee membership discounts, etc. All employees are introduced to the wellness program at their orientation session.

**The final benchmark is to evaluate outcomes.** Baseline and follow-up data are compared to assess the interventions’ impact on employees. Outcome data adds value to the program when it illustrates health benefits to employees and cost savings to the health system.

Spreading the word about successful programs boosts participation in other wellness initiatives. For example, a Biggest Loser contest had 65 participants. They had so much fun and success that 120 people signed up for the Healthy Wage weight loss program.

The Wellness Works Committee accomplished all of this in 2.5 years. There is still much to do, but having a great foundation and the correct tools—WELCO, THP, a wellness team, and senior management support—has made all the difference. The next goal is to find ways to maintain employee engagement, provide consistent motivation, and help employees strive toward personal wellness every day of their lives.

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