

When It Comes From You...

The Power of CEO Support In Advancing
A Small Business Wellness Initiative

◆ By David Hunnicutt, PhD



Perhaps the single most important element in building and sustaining a wellness program in a small business setting is having CEO buy-in. Indeed, time and time again, it has been our experience that the organizations that successfully garner senior-level support are the ones that have healthier employees and better working environments.

But the question for most wellness advocates in a small business setting is, "How can I get my CEO to get behind this concept?" Or, if they are already bought in, "How can I get them to be the organization's best advocate for personal health and well-being."

These are great questions and they deserve a closer look.

In fact, in the remainder of this article, we'll divide our discussion into two parts. The first part will focus on strategies that you can employ to get your CEO to buy-in to the concept. The second part will put forth ideas that you can leverage to get your CEO to be the best wellness advocate possible.



Part I: CEO's Who Need To Get Religion

Let's cut to the chase—there are still a lot of small business leaders who have yet to fully discover the power of a wellness program. But that's O.K.—they deserve to be given the benefit of the doubt. Believe it or not, worksite wellness programs are still a relatively new phenomenon—especially in small business settings. And although it's not ideal, it is completely understandable that not everyone buys in to this concept. To be sure, we've still got a ways to go before every small business leader completely comprehends the benefits of putting such a program into place.

But even though your CEO doesn't completely connect, it doesn't mean you're doomed. Here are five powerful strategies for getting them to buy-in.

1. Make The Business Case For Workplace Wellness Programs.

Perhaps the most logical place to start in getting your CEO to buy into the concept is by presenting the business case for implementing a workplace wellness program. Fortunately, this is a relatively easy thing to do as there are presently a number of good articles, expert interviews and PowerPoint presentations already in circulation that address this topic. One particularly good resource that we encourage you to utilize is WELCOA's Members-Only website, InfoPoint. In it, you'll find numerous articles discussing the ROI of wellness programs as well as easy-to-understand podcasts and PowerPoint presentations.

When used effectively, this material can go a long way toward making a believer out of your CEO.

“Executive Health Programs are medically-based encounters designed specifically for company leaders.”

2. Enroll Your CEO In An Executive Health Program.

If you are one of the lucky ones, all it will take is for your CEO to see the literature supporting the efficacy of workplace wellness programs and they'll jump on board. However, be warned—that's not always the way it goes; sometimes it takes more. And that's where Executive Health Programs come into play.

In a nutshell, Executive Health Programs are medically-based encounters designed specifically for company leaders. Logistically, your CEO will need to sign-up in advance to take part in the program. Having expressed interest and reserved a spot in the program, they'll be sent forms that will need to be completed in advance. These forms will include information about payment (breathe easy, usually these programs are covered by insurance) as well as present health practices including a personal medical history.

Having completed the necessary paperwork, your CEO will then spend a day participating in an extensive battery of tests which will, in turn, provide them with a detailed snapshot of their personal health status. And, when done right, this experience is a very powerful one that has a lasting impact. To be sure, I know a lot of small company leaders who pooh-poohed this idea until they went through such a program.

If you are interested in such an experience, you can contact a local hospital and inquire about executive physicals—even small town healthcare facilities are now offering them. Or if your CEO is interested in a more profound experience, you should check out the Mayo Clinic's Executive Health Program—it's an unbelievably meaningful experience.

3. Present Your CEO With Employee Testimonials.

Another excellent strategy for getting your CEO to buy into the concept of worksite wellness is to provide them with employee testimonials. Like the Executive Health Program encounter, a well-prepared employee testimonial can leave an indelible mark in the mind and on the heart of your company leader.

For example, imagine the impact that will be felt when your CEO better understands how specific employees, who make their living within the four walls of your own company, struggled with personal health issues and how these struggles impacted their lives and work performance. Also, imagine the satisfaction that your CEO will feel when they learn about how better health practices made the difference in the life of that particular employee.

If you haven't used this strategy before (and most haven't) you should strongly consider it. The best way to do it is to have a series of personal



“...by openly role modeling good health habits, your CEO is telling the rest of the organization that making wellness a personal priority is a good idea..”

conversations with those employees who have made dramatic health improvements and ask them if they'd be willing to share their stories with the CEO and other company leaders. It can be done over a lunch time or in a special meeting that can be convened pretty easily.

4. Connect Your CEO With Other CEO's Who Get It.

The concept is known as elephant bumping—and it's powerful. Here's why. There's no question that, 99 times out of 100, CEO's get to the top because they are willing to work very hard and put up with a lot of stuff that others just aren't willing to tolerate. As a result of learning from the school of hard knocks, CEO's know things that other people don't. And that's why CEO's love to talk with other CEO's. Not only is it good for their egos, it's a great opportunity for them to rub shoulders with other apex predators that have followed the same path as themselves.

For many, the question becomes, “So how exactly do I get my CEO in touch with other CEO's who have built great wellness programs?”

Here's what we would suggest. First and foremost, contact your local Chamber of Commerce and inquire in no uncertain terms that you are looking to identify any companies that have bona fide

wellness programs. Moreover, you should also inquire if there are any opportunities for your CEO to attend a roundtable of other business leaders who would be willing to share their insights on developing and sustaining a workplace wellness program. With healthcare cost containment such a large issue, most Chambers are conducting these programs regularly.

Secondly, get a hold of the publication, “Leading By Example” published by Washington-based policy group, Partnership for Prevention. In this excellent publication you'll find numerous testimonials from CEO's of large, medium, and small-sized companies. You can access a copy of this publication by visiting Partnership's website at www.prevent.org.

Thirdly, download the CEO interviews from WELCOA's InfoPoint. These in-depth interviews are packed with key insights of what motivated other CEO's to get into the game.

5. Show Your CEO How Other Small Businesses Have Done It.

There's an old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. We'll, when it comes to starting a workplace wellness program, a good case study is worth a thousand pictures! Indeed, a good comprehensive case study that specifically outlines the various components of the program—

including the goals and objectives, the budget and personnel, as well as the exact intervention and approaches—can be just the thing that grabs your CEO's attention and finally gets them on board.

In fact, it's been our experience that when a CEO reads a case study like the one done by WELCOA featuring Des Moines-base Townsend Engineering, things begin to change. Starting their program back in the late 1970's, then CEO Ted Townsend had the desire to build a company culture that ensured that when people came to work for Townsend they would thrive. Beginning with small steps, Townsend implemented things like health screenings and personal health assessments. Then adding things like a fitness center and walking trails, Townsend Engineering began changing the way it conducted its business.

To the delight of everyone, Townsend became a world-class organization whose turnover levels are some of the lowest of any business in the country.

If you have a CEO that hasn't warmed up to the idea of implementing a worksite wellness program, we would suggest that you begin by snuggling up to these five ideas right from the get-go. If delivered thoughtfully, you'll be surprised how well they can work.



Part 2: Turning Your CEO Into A Wellness Champion

Once your CEO has bought into the notion that worksite wellness needs to be a part of your organization's small business strategy, it's time to prepare your leader for becoming the group's wellness champion.

And, similar to the tactics used to get CEO's to buy into the concept in the first place, there are proven strategies that can take your organization's leader to the coveted wellness champion level.

So if you are looking for ways to strengthen your CEO's commitment to wellness, here are two important items to consider.

1. Your CEO Must "Talk the Talk"

Plain and simple, if you want your CEO to be the organization's wellness champion it's essential that they "talk the talk." And, while it may seem obvious, it bears repeating. If you want to build a healthier culture, your CEO has to publicly communicate its importance. In fact, it's been our experience that this is perhaps the most important thing any small business leader can do to advance wellness within the organization.

By talking the talk, the CEO is personally communicating that wellness and healthier lifestyles are important priorities and that the expectation is that everyone takes the message seriously. And make no mistake about it—this overt form of communication is powerful.

But there is a catch.

In order for the message to be heard from top to bottom, it has to be well-crafted and heart-felt. Certainly,

this need not be an intimidating proposition but it will require some careful thought and attention.

In essence, in order to be effective, your CEO really needs to develop a brief vision statement that addresses the health and well-being of each and every employee within the organization. And that message needs to be delivered with kindness, care, and concern.

Tips For Crafting A CEO Vision Statement For Wellness

It should be no more than one double-spaced type-written page.

It should be easy to articulate and even easier to understand.

It should paint a visual picture setting forth the tangible ways that the organization will change for the better.

It should be written with both backbone and heart—firm but fair.

It should be written with the best interests of the individual in mind.

It should establish an expectation that you are looking for everyone to get behind it.

2. Your CEO Must "Walk the Walk"

The second way that you can help to build your CEO's credibility as the organization's wellness champion is make sure that they "walk the walk." In fact, positive role modeling is going to be a very important part of the leadership process if you are going to build a culture centered on health and well-being.

A couple of points are worth illuminating here.

First, positive role modeling doesn't mean that your CEO has to be a tri-athlete or some kind of super-human physical specimen. In fact, there are a lot of CEO's who are great role models but are less than perfect in their overall health habits. What good role modeling does mean in this

instance is that your CEO is sincere, genuine, and transparent in their desire to lead a healthier lifestyle.

For example, I'm familiar with a lot of CEO's who get winded just licking a postage stamp. But that hasn't kept them from publicly taking part in a modest routine of physical activity every day. Indeed, more often than not, it's these kinds of CEO's who have the greatest impact—not the super jocks. I'm guessing that it has to do with the perception that they're viewed by the rest of the world not as some kind of crazed health Nazi who's looking to change the world but rather a normal person who struggles with the same kind of issues that everyone else is wrestling with.

Another issue that should be taken into account when it comes to role modeling is that by openly role modeling good health habits, your CEO is telling the rest of the organization that making wellness a personal priority is a good idea—and that personal touch is the one thing that's going to set the tone for the magnificent changes that are about to occur within the organization as a whole.

Summary

In this article, we've made note of the fact that CEO support is essential if you are looking to implement a wellness program in your small business setting. In addition, a series of proven strategies have been presented with regard to getting your CEO to buy into the concept of workplace wellness—and once they've made the commitment, how to become the organization's wellness champion. ★



All information ©Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) 2008. WELCOA provides worksite wellness products, services, and information to thousands of organizations nationwide. For more information about, visit www.welcoa.org.

Suggested Citation: Hunnicutt, D. (2008). *When It Comes From You*. WELCOA's *Absolute Advantage* Magazine, 7(2), 10-15.

