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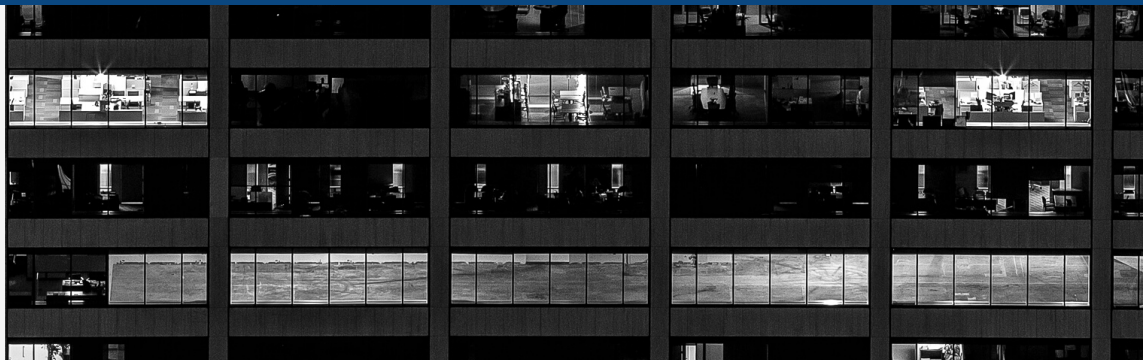


Making a Culture of Health Actionable for Employers

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Background

Efforts to improve workforce health and productivity by emphasizing a corporate “culture of health” may bolster efforts to improve participation in workplace health and wellbeing programs. However, a culture of health is difficult to assess. Quantifying its connection to absence, productivity and business performance poses additional challenges. Organizing the existing evidence linking organizational culture and program participation may help employers maximize the value of their health and productivity strategies by aligning their benefit design with their company’s shared norms, beliefs and values.

We reviewed the existing peer-reviewed research literature on the topic of organizational culture and program participation – giving additional attention to studies that provide insights into the impact on productivity, which is critical to the value proposition for a strong culture of health. We set out to address how organizational culture is defined and measured, what types of programs are assessed and measured, and the findings on the link between organizational culture and program participation. Seventeen studies published in the last ten years met the criteria for our [review](#). Based on those studies, we convened a panel of 14 experts to provide guidance to employers provided in this report.

Key findings from the research review include:

- The concept of culture was assessed differently by study. The most common elements measured were social support and health promotion or communication. Additional

elements included in studies were trust in leadership, wellness vendors, self-care, adaptation, respect and human potential, safety climate, and job demand-control.

- Only two studies included productivity measures, both of which found an association with improved health behavior.
- Workplace programs were also variable across studies. The most common types of programs studied were health promotion or wellness, followed by health assessments, coaching or counseling, physical activity, and finally employee assistance programs.
- Most studies showed a positive association between favorable cultural elements and participation in programs. In fact, 31 findings across 17 studies showed a positive association between cultural elements and program participation; 11 findings showed no association, and only 2 findings showed a negative association.

Guidance for Employers

From the studies reviewed, the experts recommend employers do the following:

1. ALIGN THE HEALTH OF THE WORKFORCE WITH THE CORE VALUES OF THE FIRM.

Many organizations identify and communicate a core set of values that guide their business operations. Integrating support for workforce health into a company's existing core values reinforces that its health promotion efforts are more than an approach to managing human capital costs. They are vital to the business strategy. This can help leaders, supervisors, and front-line employees link their lifestyle, behavioral and care choices to the company's mission—and by extension, to their own opportunities to prosper within a financially healthy organization. Emphasizing the link to core values can also help sustain a commitment to health through challenges such as changing business demands or organizational restructuring.

2. MAKE THE BUSINESS CASE TO OBTAIN LEADERSHIP BUY-IN.

As the research literature indicates, offering health promotion programs is one thing. Getting leaders to prioritize support for these efforts is another. A strong business case for well-executed, effective programs can make the difference between programs that receive full support from leadership, and those that are offered just to keep up with HR trends.

Not all leaders find the same kinds of business cases compelling. This underscores the importance of understanding the perspectives of different stakeholders—such as heads of finance, operations, and even front-line managers—and the type of information they will find motivating to promote change. Some approaches can include:

- **Emphasize a program's value to the business, rather than simply its net costs.**
Determine the goals for improving employee health and their link to realistic measures of success. Utilize data and assessment tools to show how an intervention impacts the

workforce in ways that are meaningful to real world business outcomes. Metrics can include well-being, performance, participation rates, talent attraction and retention, or the burden of disease in terms of lost productivity, disability leaves, or medical and pharmacy usage.

- **Leverage employer peers.** Make use of success stories from peer competitors—particularly when their approaches generate favorable public perception or are well-received by employees. Benchmarking utilization, absence and disability outcomes against comparable businesses can also indicate the value an effective program can deliver.
- **Solicit employee feedback.** This can give valuable insight into the strength of shared beliefs about an organization's commitment to employee health and well-being. Presenting leaders with action plans based on these findings can help them weigh the benefits of addressing employees' needs and concerns. Acting on employee's insights can also send a strong signal that leaders view them as partners in fostering health as a shared cultural value (see below). It can also nurture a culture of diversity and inclusiveness, given that needs and preferences may differ across generations, locations and ethnic groups.

3. CULTIVATE MODELS OF HEALTHY BEHAVIOR.

Integrating health themes into an organization's core values can send a strong signal that employees' choices are critical to the company's performance. The signal will be reinforced when leaders, supervisors and peers endorse the value of health through their words and actions. This can be accomplished in several ways, including:

- **Encourage leaders and supervisors** to participate in workplace programs, and to tell the story of their decision and their experiences, signals to subordinates that it is not only acceptable to use benefits and resources but encouraged.
- **Work with supervisors** to develop health engagement approaches as part of annual planning—such as how to identify employees who may benefit from programs and implementing staffing strategies that balance workplace program participation against operational needs—and supervisors' performance evaluations.
- **Include supervisors and front-line employees** when developing health promotion initiatives and soliciting their feedback for ways to make programs more relevant to their needs and the needs of their business unit. Seeing their needs and preferences reflected in benefit offerings can also give employers a greater sense of inclusion and engagement.
- **Socialize the health promotion experience** through group-based, mutually supportive programs. Simple but effective examples can include group fitness classes, walking meetings and healthy recipe sharing. Introducing healthy competition by assigning

points for personal or team accomplishments, and promoting results through dashboards and social media, can also reinforce shared values of healthy living.

4. MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE THE EASY CHOICE.

Ensure that health promotion approaches are impactful and meaningful to employees by using tools that appeal to a broad range of employees with differing needs. This will require gathering employees' feedback about their needs and what kinds of programs they could and would utilize. It also means being open to more holistic interpretations of health and well-being—for example, physical, mental, financial and spiritual—as defined by employees themselves, and showing a willingness to address barriers to participation such as stigma, costs, work scheduling, and commute times.

Keep in mind that while not strictly “cultural,” company policies and the work environment can promote or hinder healthy behaviors. Policies supporting employee health may include tobacco-free workspaces, flex schedules, and time off benefits. Physical environments can include walking areas, exercise facilities, access to stairs, healthy food options in cafeterias and vending machines, relaxing break areas, and ergonomic desks. Virtual, telephonic, and on-site providers and vendor partners may be particularly well-equipped to support employees' needs while dedicated member information resources (such as employee assistance programs and concierge programs) may help instill trust and participation.

5. KEEP IN MIND THAT THERE ARE LIMITS TO WHAT AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CAN ACCOMPLISH.

While the workplace affords great opportunities to elevate health as a cultural value, employers need to set reasonable expectations about what can and cannot be accomplished by improving an organizational culture of health. Social factors that may be outside of an employer's immediate control—such as access to care, affordable housing and childcare, transportation alternatives, healthy food options, educational and social support resources—contribute greatly to its employees' health. A company's organizational culture of health may be most impactful when situated in a larger strategy of engaging with the communities from which it hires. This may occur at the highest levels of the organization through community grants to address social, educational, infrastructural or environmental issues, and at lower levels by supporting employees in volunteer and community improvement activities.

Final Thoughts

An organization's unique cultural identity can develop organically—but it can also be shaped deliberately. Offering programs and benefits that promote healthy behaviors represents one pillar of an organizational culture of health. Ensuring that employees will take advantage of health promotion initiatives may require the cultivation of health norms, beliefs and values that are shared throughout the organization.