

# Turning Blazing Infernos Into Manageable Camp Fires

BY Troy Adams PHD

**T**here is a five-alarm fire blazing out of control inside your employee benefits barn. Every year your employee health care costs increase at a dramatic rate and there is no sign of cooling anytime soon. You know this because you have seen it and felt it. Health care costs are burning up profits. Absenteeism, lost productivity, short-term disability, and workers compensation are also fueling the fire. The epidemic of chronic disease is like the gasoline on the flames. So what can be done to get this fire under control? There is one common solution that will cool the fire and slow the epidemic of chronic disease: Healthy employee behavior. What we need is a high-pressure fire hose that sprays out "Healthy employee behavior." Wouldn't it be great if it were that simple?

**NEWS FLASH:** "Steve Aldana and Troy Adams, leave cushy professorial jobs to become wellness firefighters." It's true. Prior to creating WellSteps, Steve and I were both university professors, doing research, teaching students, and consulting with organizations that were struggling with employee related costs. But while we were tucked safely within the walls of the ivory tower, we could see that the "Employee benefit barn" was on fire. From our perspective, it looked like everyone was standing around gawking and complaining with great animation that "The barn was on fire," but nobody was doing much to extinguish the cause of the flames. No fire engines. No high-pressure hoses. Just a lot of shopping for cheaper health care and a whole lot of cost shifting.



We realized that we had been studying and evaluating the single biggest cause of the fires, unhealthy behaviors. We recognized that we could help reduce the employee benefits flames and reduce chronic disease by focusing on the common solution—employee health behaviors. At our core, we believe that people can change, that change is easier with help, and that change improves health, work, and relationships. We believe it because we have seen it happen time and time and time again. In fact, we believe when enough people change health behaviors, it can create a ground swell that will change public health in America as we know it.

So what are the challenges that companies face when trying to engage employees in behavior change? Remember, employee behavior change is the key to saving the barn.

When we visit with companies, we consistently see five challenges. First, there are stakeholders who have a hard time admitting that the barn is on fire. Either they cannot or will not acknowledge the signs that are readily apparent to everyone else. Even if they do, they often remain unconvinced that evidence-based strategies will have an effect on their employee benefit costs. This is an ironic belief since every successful business has grown by identifying key business challenges and by applying sound strategy to overcome them. While considering whether behavior change strategies make sense for your challenge, we think it is fair to ask questions such as “What is the business case for the strategies you propose?” or “Will the investment of resources be worth the cost?” At WellSteps.com, we created a free science-based, Return on Investment calculator to help stakeholders answer these very questions.

Second, employee behavior is complex. There is no question that the work environment influences employee health behavior. So even though programs on healthy eating are provided, change will come slow if the vending machines are stocked with unhealthy choices and the cafeteria serves gravy as a beverage. For change to occur and endure, the culture has to support it. I once visited a worksite in which nearly 50% of the employees were obese. As I walked around, I found myself wading in a 6-inch deep puddle of chocolate truffles. “Where did these truffles come from?” I asked. “From vendors—they love us” I was told. I wondered whether employees ate more truffles because they were so abundant. As a chocolate lover, I already knew the answer to this question. So efforts to change employee behavior have to do the heavy lifting of culture change. At WellSteps.com, we created a free health culture audit tool called “The Checklist to Change” to help companies evaluate and modify their own health culture.

It would be simple if work environment were the only determinant of employee health behavior. But the home environment has perhaps the most powerful influence on behavior. It is interesting then, that most programs designed to change health behaviors at work do not extend to the employees home or to their dependents. Employees who have support at home are more likely to succeed in their efforts to change. At WellSteps, we believe that the employee deserves change support at home and so do the other dependents who live there. That is why most of our programs reach out to dependents. We even have a program that involves the family pet!

Third, we often hear from the people charged with running employee wellness programs that it is hard to come up with fresh, new ways to engage employees. Sometimes on closer examination, we find that these programs are too complex, not scientifically sound, or poorly communicated. These are common problems with workable solutions. At WellSteps, we designed simple programs that target one behavior at a time. Each step in every program is intuitive and builds on the previous steps so that the employee is guided from wherever they are at program kick-off to healthier behavior by the end of the program. Each program is based on one of the most robust behavior change theories and is targeted at a scientifically determined behavior. All employees and in some cases, dependents, are invited to participate in every program by email and by a home mailer. Employees with extra needs or interests receive additional invitations. We know that all employees will never participate in every program. But we are confident that our suite of programs provides something for everyone when they are ready to participate. Examples of programs include:

- » **Move It!** This program is designed to encourage physical activity by inspiring peer support and by creating friendly competition. Distinct groups within a company, such as sites or departments, can compete against each other to win the Gold, Silver, or Bronze WellSteps™ Trophy. Individual participants can earn more points by being physically active with other people or pets!
- » **The Culprit and The Cure.** This program will help users understand why simple behavior change is important. Users receive a free copy of Dr. Aldana’s The Culprit and The Cure that explains how physical activity, healthy eating, and being smoke free can change their life.
- » **TV Timeout.** This program is designed to help families alter their evening schedules enough to include productive behaviors such as family physical activity, communication, reading, or recreation.
- » **Random Acts of Kindness.** Experience feelings of goodwill and help build a positive culture in the workplace



or family by performing a random act of kindness each week for three weeks.

- » **The Fast Food Guide.** This program will turn users into experts on the nutritional quality of fast food. Each participant will get a copy of the Stop & Go Fast Food Nutrition Guide.
- » **Maintain Don't Gain.** This program is designed to help users avoid holiday weight gain.
- » **Food Makeover.** This program is designed to modify the home food environment by enabling participants to choose and prepare healthy foods at home.
- » **Earth Wise.** To promote simple, ecological actions that will benefit the environment
- » **What's Your Pressure?** To raise awareness of HBP risks and to encourage measurement
- » And many other programs...

Fourth, employee access to the wellness program is a problem. Employees may: be geographically dispersed, not have access to the web, have limited literacy or be unable to speak English. We know of one company that has operations in nearly 1,000 U.S. locations. They cannot possibly hire a wellness coordinator for every location nor should they. Normal employees, with the help of a wellness expert, can serve as a local wellness coordinator to facilitate delivery of turn-key programs. WellSteps program materials can be delivered nearly anywhere via the web and everywhere via the mail system. Steve visited a plant in Kentucky where they make a product used on trucks. The vast majority of the workers did not have web access. They were also more likely to have limited literacy. WellSteps programs can be delivered to them using a paper/pencil format. All program materials are developed at the 6th grade reading level. Some programs can also be delivered in paper/pencil format in Spanish.

Fifth, programs often rely solely on external incentives to engage employees. This is likely to create an entitlement mentality in which employees will only change if you give them something. We believe that external incentives have a place. They can create behavior change momentum which is why WellSteps provides both an incentive to enroll in each behavior change program and an incentive to finish. Enrollment incentives include things needed for program participation like books and pedometers. Completion incentives include drawings for things like new appliances, trips, iPods, etc. Importantly, as part of every program, we ask the user to reflect on their feelings and experiences. This helps them connect their change with tangible health benefits and feelings that are the most powerful incentives of all.

We feel that it is only fair to disclose what WellSteps does not do. First, we do not provide a peer-reviewed, hyperlinked sea of health information. These resources have their place, but information alone doesn't usually change behavior. We are not a company who is peddling a Health Risk Appraisal. Assessing employee behavior is important and we have a free tool that gauges behavior nicely, but measuring behavior doesn't always help change it. Lastly, we do not provide coaching or disease management. We believe that coaching can help employees change behavior but the data just are not there yet. We think that if your workers have a chronic disease they need good disease management. But if an employee reaches disease management, in our opinion, prevention opportunities may have been missed.

Our position as wellness firefighters is that nearly all "Uncontrolled fires" are avoidable. The truth is, 70% to 90% of all chronic diseases are completely preventable. Prevent chronic diseases and you shrink the fire in the barn from a raging inferno to a manageable camp fire. All the wellness efforts in the world won't make the fire go out, but it can keep the barn from burning down. You just have to do the right things at the right time. If you don't have a wellness program, you need one now before the barn catches fire. If you already have a wellness program, make sure it is focused on changing behaviors. Focusing on anything else is missing the core of the problem.

Simple, fun, and effective behavior change programs can help people change. That's what WellSteps is all about. ★



ABOUT **Troy Adams** PhD

**Dr. Troy Adams** has been engaged in the health promotion industry for nearly 25 years. His research has focused on behavioral and psychosocial issues that impede people from experiencing optimal well-being. He has published several dozen articles and received nearly one million dollars in grants and contracts. His research has been presented at professional conferences all over the United States, in Great Britain and in Australia. He has also presented hundreds of invited lectures and speeches on personal effectiveness, wellness, and personal finance. He is currently the Vice President of WellSteps and a Principal in the Lifestyle Research Group. He also serves as a Graduate Program Director in the Health Promotion and Wellness Doctoral degree at Rocky Mountain University of Health Professions. Additionally, he is on the Editorial Board for the American Journal of Health Promotion and the National Wellness Institute Board of Trustees.



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