



Insights From The Trenches

BY Steven G. Aldana PHD



SINCE LEAVING ACADEMIA, I'VE BEEN ABLE TO TRAVEL ALL OVER THE U.S. AND SEE EVERY SORT OF WELLNESS PROGRAM IMAGINABLE. Large companies have been offering wellness programs for a long time, but now there are more and more medium and even small companies jumping on the healthy employee band wagon. In my journeys, I've tried to be as open minded as possible or at least I've tried to not pass judgment until I've seen outcome data. But it's hard when just about anything can be considered "wellness." Wellness programs are typically managed by someone in human resources or benefits. But I've seen wellness programs run by nurses, registered dieticians, physicians, chiropractors, dentists, MBA's, interns and even a former banker. With such diverse program leadership it's not surprising that there is an assortment of activities that are considered wellness.

A wellness program that I visited at a large car dealership consisted of making raw, vegan smoothies available to employees throughout the day. That was their entire wellness program. Don't get me wrong, I think raw vegan smoothies are wonderful, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around the unlikely marriage of "NASCAR" and "vegan smoothie." Who knows, it might actually help these guys get healthier, but I have to confess that I've never seen anything like it before.

A large law firm started a wellness program and to get their attorneys to complete a health risk appraisal, they paid each of them \$500 each. They got good participation and they were able to get good baseline data. And, you can guess what happened when they announced their next wellness program. Everyone wanted to know, "How much money do we get?" What started as a well intended wellness program quickly became an entitlement program. Since that unfortunate start, this program has never really been able to get much traction.

As an outsider observing all these programs, I've tried to be a fly on the wall and I've kept a list of things I liked and things that bothered me. You could call this list my insights from the trenches. They are just my observations and they are not organized in any certain fashion. But I hope they will help you improve your wellness programming efforts. At least you might learn what NOT to do.

Incentives: Subsidizing Taste Testers

Think about the last time you exercised. Why did you do it? Did anyone pay you for doing it? Did you get a gift card? Did you exercise because you wanted to win a water bottle or get a discount on your insurance premiums? This is how most program use incentives.

People who exercise regularly don't need external (extrinsic) incentives. We have our own set of internal (intrinsic) incentives. For example, when I exercise I like the way I feel afterwards. I'm more productive and creative when I get regular exercise. I sleep more soundly. Exercise helps me maintain a healthy body weight. When I exercise outside the fresh air is invigorating. My exercise also makes my dog happy and who doesn't like a happy dog? I get to spend time with my wife and children when I exercise and most importantly I have fun. Nope, my incentives for exercising aren't given to me, I don't earn them. Somehow they spring up from within me and they are powerful enough to make me want to exercise everyday.

I don't get paid to exercise. On the contrary, I often pay money for the experience. After a big snow storm, I clear my schedule, get my kids and we all head to the slopes for some snow boarding. *It costs me money to exercise.* For me, there's no need for a gift card, iPod, or water bottle, it's about gently gliding down the steep, untouched slopes when they are covered with 18 inches of snow that is the consistency of whipped cream. It's like surfing on clouds. The ground is below you somewhere but you can't really tell where it begins or ends. All this happens somewhere between earth and just above the earth. It's an ethereal experience that is beyond any description that can be produced by the English language. At the end of the day, the only muscles on my body that are sore are the ones that I use to smile.

The personal benefits of this experience are so powerful and enjoyable that I gladly pay money for the opportunity. For most people who have made exercise a habit, the intrinsic incentives are so powerful we actually use our own money to purchase running shoes, exercise clothes, mountain bikes, and any other equipment that can aid us in our activities. We buy gym memberships and exercise equipment. We welcome opportunities to sweat.

Extrinsic incentives are used extensively in our efforts to promote new, healthy behaviors, but they may not be giving us what we want—employees who practice healthy behaviors on their own accord—for the rest of their lives. *Most often incentives are good at getting people to come to the well and taste the water of wellness, but unless people are*



able to make the transition from extrinsic incentives to more meaningful internal rewards, all we are doing is subsidizing taste testers. Once we remove the external incentive the behavior quickly disappears. No incentive, no behavior.

In our wellness programs we dangle a carrot in front of our employees and hope they will make an effort to take a bite. We know incentives get some people moving who might not otherwise. It's clear that incentives drive short-term behavior change, but to really impact long-term health, healthy behaviors must be maintained for life, they must be supported by intrinsic benefits.

To increase the odds that our use of incentives really impacts long-term behavior, we need to help our employees transition from extrinsic to intrinsic incentives. The best way to do this is to help them first experience the benefits, help them recognize the benefits, get them to enjoy the taste of the benefits and then to understand what they are tasting.

Here are a few ideas that might help with this transition.

- ▶ Use incentives, give them out, they will help jump start participation, but don't make a big deal of them. Make a big deal out of the benefits.
- ▶ Make sure your employees know what all the benefits are. Give them a "What's in it for me?" list. Include examples or stories of each, especially if you can use stories from within your own workforce.
- ▶ At the end of each program ask questions like:
 - ◆ Now that you've been doing this new behavior for a while, how has your life changed?
 - ◆ Have you experienced any improvement in your health or quality of life?
 - ◆ Is your life any better now?
 - ◆ Make a list if the ways your life/health has changed.



- ▶ Make this an emotional experience. Nothing is more powerful than a slight tug on the heart-strings and nothing does this better than stories. What are the success stories of your employees? You have employees who have undergone a complete health transformation. Some may call this a re-birth. Communicate these stories often and to everyone. Before and after stories are powerful. Put them in your newsletters, websites and payroll stuffers. Make posters and hang them in the halls like the one shown below from the wellness program at the Public Employees Health Program (PEHP) pehp.org.
- ▶ Promote your one-liners. They are actually expressions of intrinsic benefits.
 - ◆ Who knew vegetables could taste good?
 - ◆ I can walk up a flight of stairs and I don't feel exhausted.
 - ◆ My blood cholesterol has improved, now I don't have to take cholesterol medications any more.

In the January issue of CDC's journal Preventing Chronic Disease, I published a research paper that describes what I call "Healthy behavior decay".¹ It's a term I coined that describes our failure to base our healthy behaviors on intrinsic incentives. As we participate in lifestyle change programs we quickly adopt new behaviors. This is the same

thing that happens during the first couple weeks of a New Year's resolution. We've adopted new behaviors and we're on our way to better health. As time passes our initial enthusiasm wanes, the realities of life return, and we slowly revert to our prior behaviors. Our newly adopted healthy behaviors have decayed, being replaced by our old habits. This research and the need to transition from extrinsic to intrinsic incentives is a big part of all the programs we offer at WellSteps. When we help individuals transition toward intrinsic rewards, healthy behavior decay is avoided. After all, long-term behavior change is the most important thing goal for your employees.



Frustration With The Overuse of Behavior Change Models

When I introduce myself to others, I describe myself as a “recovering academic” partially as a joke and partially to ask forgiveness for all my years of scholarly activity and teaching that was sometimes disconnected from the real world. Like many others, I am guilty of marching to the beat of the academic drum that required me to engage in both research and teaching that was pleasing to the professorial priesthood, but was many times completely detached from the realities of the actual worksite world. I hope some day to receive absolution.

Many have asked me how they can use the different behavior change models to create effective wellness programs. Most students in academic programs spend a semester or two studying the stages of change model, the health belief model, the social marketing model, the PRECEDE model and many, many others. No doubt these models are logical and make some sense of the complexities of behavior change. But they are after all, just theories. Ask yourself these questions: When developing wellness programs or ideas, were the intricacies of behavior change models first reviewed? Was one of these theories used to guide your planning, development and implementation? Maybe a few people use these models, but most people probably forged ahead with programming regardless of theoretical underpinnings. The truth is, our wellness programs have to work with people who live in the real world. They have to work with people who have real problems and real struggles. It’s hard to produce a wellness program that uses concepts like emotional conflict, decisional balance, and peer-to-peer sub-generational interactions. (Actually, I made this last term up just to see if you were still paying attention, but you get the point.)

Effective real world wellness efforts have to be composed of time tested, feasible, deliverable, in-the-trenches components. Michael O’Donnell has written about this dilemma and proposes a street level model of behavior change that can actually be used with everything we do.

If you were to boil all the behavior change theories down to their fundamental components, you would get four underlying factors. People change behaviors when they have awareness, motivation, tools, and help from policies and the environment. That’s it. Awareness is synonymous with education. Motivation can come from using incentives, success stories, peer support, and competitions. Tools are the skills and strategies we need to be able to make successful behavior change. Policy and environmental changes support our efforts to become and stay healthier. These also help us change our culture. When used together, these four factors give us the best chances of influencing employee health behaviors. They are easy to understand and most of the things we already do in our programs fit into one of these categories. Some of the things we do are actually part of several categories. For example, a pedometer helps create awareness. It lets us know how physically active we are. It is also a tool to help us track our progress and it can motivate us to be more active.

Take a moment, reach over you shoulder and pat yourself on the back for a job well done. You deserve it. You’ve been using proper behavior change ideas all along, you just didn’t know it. Next time you are planning a program keep it directed toward awareness, motivation, tools, and policy and you will be creating programs that work and are based on the best behavior change tools we have.

Behavior Change In The Real World

Awareness	Motivation	Tools	Policy & Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Payroll stuffers ◆ Internet sites ◆ Magazines ◆ Lunch and learns ◆ Special speakers ◆ Newsletters ◆ Flyers ◆ Posters ◆ Email notifications ◆ TV/video programs ◆ Books ◆ Pedometers ◆ Letter from the CEO ◆ HRAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Before/after stories ◆ Incentives ◆ HRA feedback ◆ Peer support ◆ Team competitions ◆ Family involvement ◆ Understanding of the benefits of healthy living ◆ Job performance metrics can include wellness participation ◆ Outside speakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ How-to strategies ◆ Goal setting ◆ Stop & Go Fast Food Guide ◆ Comfortable walking shoes ◆ Healthy food substitutions ◆ Making healthy choices ◆ How to make healthy foods ◆ Finding inexpensive healthy foods ◆ Pedometers ◆ Shopping for healthy foods ◆ Learn how to grow tomatoes ◆ Split a meal with someone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Flex time for physical activity ◆ Healthy food in cafeteria ◆ Freedom from media/ads that peddle risky behaviors ◆ Farmer’s market ◆ Free from overly demanding work ◆ Opportunities to be physically active ◆ Walking/bike paths ◆ Recess and P.E. at schools ◆ Medical coverage for preventive services ◆ Benefits package that supports being healthy ◆ No smoking policies ◆ Flex time ◆ Supportive peers/friends ◆ Church, community support



“A pedometer helps create awareness. It lets us know how physically active we are. It is also a tool to help us track our progress and it can motivate us to be more active.”



Behavior Change Requires Culture Change

A typical worksite will spend approximately 60% of its annual health care expenditures on dependents and spouses. Employees use health care too, but not as much as family members. By focusing only on employees, most worksite wellness efforts are only addressing one part of the total employee expense equation. The most effective wellness programs also reach out to spouses, significant others and dependents. Not only do these non-employees impact company health care costs, but they also impact other employee expense areas like absenteeism. Being absent from work because of the illness or sickness of dependents is actually more common than absenteeism due to personal illness. The health of non-employees also impacts presenteeism. I like to define presenteeism as being at work physically, but mentally absent. When we're at work and we have family members who are sick, we often spend time worrying rather than working.

More importantly, family members have a huge influence on your employee's health behaviors. Think about a typical middle-aged, male, blue-collar worker. Let's call him Larry. What determines how Larry eats every day? Food availability,

cost, convenience, family structure, time, taste, and what gets cooked for dinner all impact Larry's behaviors, and so does his race, culture, and ethnic background. If Larry is going to be successful at eating a healthy diet, wellness program efforts need to address each of these factors and more.

Ultimately, Larry is responsible for what he puts in his mouth, but we can't discount the influence of his family, worksite, community, and his culture. In 1996, Daniel Stokols² showed how our individual behaviors are greatly influenced by our peers, work environment, our communities and even the larger nation and world. If we are going to be successful at changing behaviors, we need to change the other factors. When we put together effective wellness programs, it helps to consider how each of these other factors to exert pressure on our employees behavior. Worksite wellness programs do a good job of addressing the worksite piece of this model, but it's the other areas we often ignore.

Wellness program efforts that use this interconnected perspective have a much greater chance of effecting long-term behavior change because they get at the root causes of our behaviors. Based on this perspective, here are a variety of wellness program ideas I've seen or created as part of WellSteps.



Adapted from Stokols 1996



Involve Your Employee's Family

Whenever possible, extend your worksite wellness efforts to spouses and significant others.

Why not let family members take your health risk appraisal or participate in your biometric screening? Wouldn't you want to know about a spouse that has uncontrolled high blood cholesterol?

Provide a worksite wellness program that targets just spouses and significant others. For example, in the Health at Home program at WellSteps, we take spouses on a video tour of a typical American kitchen. We go through the refrigerator, cupboards, and pantry identifying healthy and unhealthy foods. We show simple tips on how to prepare healthier meals then we take them on a virtual shopping tour at the grocery store. We teach how important it is to shop the perimeter of the grocery store and to stay out of the middle where the most processed foods are displayed. Getting employee family members involved preparing healthy foods at home directly affects employee health.

Why not have an exercise program that gives extra points every time an employee exercises with someone else. Peer pressure and family support help employees stay active.

What about dependents? How about a wellness program that helps family members spend less time watching TV, video games, movies, and the internet? With the extra free time, family members will have time to grow closer, reconnect, and improve communication. They can use this additional time to grow a garden, learn a hobby, read a book, or learn a new skill such as learning to cook Thai food; it's delicious and it's healthy.



Getting employee family members involved **preparing healthy foods at home** directly affects employee health.



Change Your Employee's Community

Your employee's community includes schools, churches, city planning, trails, and parks. No, you don't have to become an elected official to change your employee's community. There are other things you can do that directly impact the health of your employees.

Have your worksite sponsor a fun run. Get your employer to sponsor a farmer's market and give employees a discount coupon if they purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.

Use your newsletter to let employees know about any efforts your employees are having in improving the health of the members of their church or community group. One group of employees got together with their local minister and created a health ministry. With their efforts, food served at church functions slowly moved away from funeral potatoes and gravy to healthier options.

Sponsor a company softball or sports team for employees.

Support any local or state legislative efforts that promote healthy living. Many communities have a trails committee or local group that actively promotes neighborhood bike paths.

Go to wellsteps.com and take the Checklist to Change Survey. It will give you dozens of ideas to help you change your employee's communities.

Take Michael Pollan's advice: Shop the **outside aisles** of the grocery store and shop at a **farmer's market** or **produce store**.



Nation And World Influences

Incorporating national and world influences is a little harder to achieve in the worksite setting, but it's just as important as other things we do. In his most recent book, *In Defense of Food*, Michael Pollan³ shows how the federal government, food scientists, and nutrition experts have created a complex ideology around food. This ideology suggests that food is just the sum of its different nutrient parts, nutrients can be mixed and matched with other chemicals to produce "highly processed, edible food substances" and that we need certified nutrition experts to help us know what to eat.

Our federal government, nutrition experts, and food scientists have created a food culture that produced excessive body weight and chronic diseases. What does this have to do with employee wellness programs? Well, this culture affects the health of your employees and part of your health care cost burden. I'm not suggesting you get congress to rewrite major portions of the farm bill or get the American Dietetics Association to stop taking money from the food industry. We'll leave that to battle to others, but I am suggesting you help your employees understand how our nation and world directly impact the foods they eat. For example, we eat a lot of food that contains high-fructose corn syrup. This is because the federal government subsidizes farmers to who grow corn. And this makes corn products extremely inexpensive. Food manufacturers would be foolish to not use cheap corn syrup. It's a lot cheaper than any other sugars.

So what do we do? As a wellness professional you can minimize the influence the nation and world has on the health of your employees by helping them take some of Michael Pollan's advice:

- ▶ Help employees understand why they should look at the ingredients in the foods they eat.
- ▶ Help them learn to avoid foods that contain ingredients that are unfamiliar, unpronounceable, more than five syllables long or that include high-fructose corn syrup.
- ▶ Shop the outside aisles of the grocery store.
- ▶ Shop at a farmer's market or produce store.
- ▶ Realize that "you are what you eat, eats too". Makes you wonder what chickens and cows eat. Generally, it's not good.
- ▶ Eat more like the French, Italians, Japanese, Indians, or Greeks.

- ▶ Don't get your fuel from the same place your car does.
- ▶ Create new wellness programs or tweak the ones you currently offer to help your employees take these steps.

My time in the trenches has shown me there is some weird stuff being passed off as Wellness out there, but I'm not too worried about the weird stuff. It is usually well intended and hopefully it won't do too much harm. Looking past the weird stuff, it's the good wellness practices I've seen that really get me excited. If we can implement some of these new ideas and perspectives, we will improve what we are doing in our wellness efforts. We're going to have a greater impact on the health of our employees and their families. We are going to transform lives. This is the most exciting and rewarding part of what we do and it is the very reason why WellSteps was created. ★

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Dr. Aldana has published over 60 research articles and has written five books on the connections between healthy living and disease prevention. He is a regular consultant to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and the California Department of Health Services. In the past few years he has given over 80 invited lectures and keynote speeches around the United States. He has received numerous state, private, and federal grants to research how the adoption of healthy behaviors can prevent, arrest, and even reverse many common chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer.



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