

# Modeling the Way to Wellness

---

Intentionally modeling the shared values of their company is a powerful way for senior managers to focus employees' attention on the most important strategies and desired workplace behaviors and to maintain credibility. Wellness programs are no exception.

Reducing health care and insurance costs is the top strategic objective for wellness programs in the U.S. according to the Buck Consultants Global Wellness Survey 2009 – ranking just ahead of improving productivity, reducing employee “presenteeism” (where employees are at work but not fully productive due to personal health issues usually chronic illnesses) and reducing absenteeism. This focus on reducing costs is not surprising in a country where 10.5% of payroll expenses are for health insurance (according to the Kaiser Family Foundation study) – and it makes wellness a competitive strategy instead of just an amalgam of benefits. Most prevalent in North America – where they are offered by 77% of employers, wellness programs are growing in popularity throughout the other regions of the world – Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa and Australia. Part of the reason for the success of wellness programs – even in this current economic climate – is, in addition to their strategic importance, companies have found that they can obtain positive results and a solid return of their investment (\$3.27 per \$1.00 spent in the largest study to date) in addition to helping improve the physical well-being of their most valuable asset – their employees. And rapid growth in wellness is predicted in the decade to come.

Senior management's leadership role has been one key to this success. There are many examples of how forward-thinking leaders have been instrumental in the success of their wellness initiatives by acting out – or modeling – their values. At **SAS Institute Inc.**, the founder Jim Goodnight's commitment to work/life balance cemented wellness as a core company value – and has been one shining example of their legendary devotion to employees. Barry Griswell, chairman and CEO of **Principal Financial Group**, set a companywide example by making a public commitment to lose weight – sending the clear message that wellness is a top-down belief. At **Navistar International Corporation**, the top 10 corporate leaders including the CEO, the CFO and the presidents and VPs of the four business units not only set the wellness strategy but are regularly quoted in the employee wellness newsletter, visibly challenge employees to beat their performance at company-sponsored fitness challenges and then present the fitness awards. **Corning Incorporated** creates companywide and plant-level dashboards showing performance on wellness initiatives to let senior executives focus the company on wellness results as part of their business management system. Similarly, when **Intel Corporation** revamped their 2001 wellness program in 2006, the senior leaders not only reviewed the potential ROIs (which average 3:1 but range from 1.2:1 to 15:1) but also the assessments of health risks in the plans. Other examples of leaders modeling the desired behaviors as part of their wellness programs include one hospital CEO who has adopted a practice of “walking meetings” so he and his staff can exercise while conferring. As is true with most major, companywide initiatives, wellness success is unlikely without senior level (“C” level) buy-in and active, visible support. By modeling their company's core values, these senior leaders are playing a key role in wellness success in organizations around the world.

And there is more to do.

The past decade has seen an explosion of research by psychologists in the new, emerging science of Positive Psychology on optimizing employee performance by enhancing individual employee well-being. One study by Thomas Wright of Kansas State University has even

quantified possible performance improvements in a range of 10% to 25% based on increased levels of psychological well-being. And this only makes sense: employees who feel happier about their life perform better in their work. Perhaps even more significantly, a recent April, 2010 longitudinal meta-analysis on the results of 223 studies of job satisfaction and subjective well-being (psychology-speak for happiness) between 1967 and 2008 goes so far as to conclude that “people who are unhappy in life are unlikely to find satisfaction at work.” The leading researcher, Nathan Bowling summarized: “These results suggest that if people are, or are predisposed to be happy and satisfied in life generally, then they will be likely to be happy and satisfied in their work.” The shift in the direction of this causal link to a focus on individual emotional well-being signals that it may now be appropriate for leaders of leading companies to consider shifting their wellness program priorities to match.

As a result, a new era in wellness is just around the corner – an era focused on emotional wellness in addition to physical health and wellness. Enlightened leaders now recognize the potential that exists by shifting their focus – and this shift in focus to working to increase emotional wellness in addition to continuing to work to improve physical wellness and job satisfaction can easily be accommodated by adjusting priorities in companies’ already-successful wellness programs.

By “walking their talk” when it comes to wellness, some senior executives have not only been role models themselves but have made their companies into role models. Executive level support is critical for wellness success and, according to Phyllis Stewart Pires of Human Resources at **Cisco Systems, Inc.**, Cisco provides it. She says: “Our executives are very aware of the value family programs represent to our employees.” By actively modeling how valuable their employees are to them, Cisco has become a role model for what companies can achieve – without compromising business success.

For wellness programs – and for other key strategies – leaders who model their core values can truly “do well by doing good” both for their employees and for their bottom-line.

### **About the Author**

Henry S. Miller is an organization transformation consultant based in northern California. As President of The Miller Group, he specializes in helping organizations improve performance and productivity by increasing the emotional well-being of their employees. He is the author of *The Serious Pursuit of Happiness* planned for 2011 publication and offers and delivers programs on *How to Increase Emotional Well-Being*. He can be reached at [hmill@millergroup.com](mailto:hmill@millergroup.com) or 408.395.0110.