

Wellness from the brain down

Many Health, Benefits and Human Resources executives today see the management of healthcare benefits costs as their top priority. They also know that the performance level of employees who are motivated and actively engaged in their work far surpasses that of other employees. It comes as no surprise to them that recent analyses of absenteeism from work show a high degree of correlation with employees known to have wellness issues.

So what do most wellness programs consist of? Usually the issues tackled are smoking, obesity and dietary related problems, general health issues such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol as well as levels of overall fitness. A minority of programs also deal with stress symptoms and even go so far as to help identify and treat depression. And for some companies, it even becomes part of a bigger, more socially involved management crusade, including first aid courses which go hand in hand with other formerly 'soft' issues such as office recycling, the 'greening' of office suppliers and greater concern for safety in the workplace.

The universal aims of all wellness programs are to improve the health, morale and well-being of staff and emphasize the sense of being part of a team. Financially, the payback will hopefully be seen in terms of improved productivity, reduced turnover rate, a decrease in absenteeism and injuries and most importantly, a decrease in overall health benefit costs.

It certainly appears as if the cost savings are real! Back in 2002, Johnson and Johnson were the first major company to report on the subject following a long-term evaluation of their wellness program. They calculated that the resulting overall reduction in medical expenses had led to savings of \$225 per employee across the corporation. Citigroup recently studied the cost benefit of its wellness program and found that the effort returned \$4.50 for every \$1 spent. Yet in many of these treatment programs, one thing is overlooked – the symptoms are being treated but not the underlying causes of their employees' wellness problems. Getting to the root cause and actually being able to do something about it, can lead to an even greater company payback. But, the real causes of wellness problems are often deep set and ingrained in the minds of the participants in these programs.

That's where the work of Dr. Katherine Benziger is beginning to make a difference at companies like P & G in their Latin American Division. Dr. Benziger's work has shown that more than 60% of people 'falsify type' in the workplace and in their social lives. This 'falsification' leads to rising levels of stress because employees are over-using inherently inefficient areas of their brain. In turn, this leads to a sense of fatigue and

exhaustion which can easily bring about loss of self-esteem, a passive behavioral attitude and eventually, depression. Prolonged 'falsification of type' also raises levels of stress across the whole body leading to physical ailments and affecting general well-being.

The eminent psychologist Carl Jung first identified the fact that we are born with just one natural lead area, an innate preference in our brain; this has been referred to as our internal compass. He identified 4 thinking types, each of them still important in today's workplace and overlaid the introvert/extravert continuum. Today, thanks to recent scientific breakthroughs, it has been shown not only that these 4 areas of preference relate to physical areas in the brain but that our one truly efficient brain area is up to 100 times more efficient. It uses less energy, yet it has the in-built ability to energize us if used well. Now, importantly, we can measure whether employees are following that natural lead and work with them to develop coping strategies for those other areas. Thanks to Dr. Benziger's assessment methodology, we can determine an employee's thinking style and identify the degree to which they are being true to their inner compass or 'falsifying type'.

A recent study by workers at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine showed that from 103 available studies, the health insurance claims of workers with both mental and physical disorders were 1.7 times higher than those of workers with physical disorders alone. They further deduced that many workers suffering from depression actually seek help for their physical symptoms leading to expensive tests and treatments. Studies also showed that employees with depression were 2.5 times more likely to miss work than colleagues.

The plain fact is that our mental and physical states are irrevocably intertwined and if we focus on just one of them, this will not provide a lasting answer to the question of improving levels of wellness. So it makes both logical and financial sense to include the Benziger Thinking Styles Assessment as part of a future oriented wellness program if we want to treat both the cause and the symptoms of stress and burn-out.

Sources:

Citigroup Wellness Study 2006

Johnson and Johnson Annual Report 2003

Scientific American Brain, Volume 17, Number 1

'Thriving in Mind' - Dr. Katherine Benziger 2007