

Introduction

What makes a workplace wellness program successful? For organizations looking to control health care costs and improve employee health, creating a successful health management program is a process that should begin with designing effective incentives, creating health-focused activities and support, and ultimately creating a culture of health across an organization that allows wellness to thrive.

All successful wellness programs share several components in common - strong support from senior management, effective communications, and educational tools and resources to support employees in the pursuit of healthier lives. Above all, these organizations realize that affecting healthy behaviors is not a “quick fix.” You can achieve short-term gains, but sustaining them requires vision and infrastructure to support these changes over the long term.

Creating a culture of health is often a gradual process that follows a typical pattern, designed to achieve specific outcomes:

- **Enrollment programs:** Designed to identify risk factors and raise employee awareness.
- **Engagement programs:** Designed to motivate employees to take action, ensure compliance and engage employees over time.
- **Achievement programs:** Designed to get results that organizations can actually see on the bottom line, in reduced health risks and lower health care costs.

Unlike wellness programs that take a punitive approach to a member who does not meet certain health outcome criteria, a more effective approach is to reward healthy behaviors for all employees, while being challenging but achievable for higher-risk employees.

Whether your organization wants to start slowly with wellness or achieve significant results right away, these three steps will provide a methodical approach that allows you to move at the pace that works best for your organization’s culture.

Enrollment programs: Introducing wellness and identifying health risks

Before an employer can hope to make strides in healthy behavior, employees must first understand the program and choose to participate. The first step for any program is to introduce wellness to employees and to clearly communicate how to get started.

- **Program elements:** Prevention and early detection of health risks are the foundation for any wellness program. Employees may be experiencing a serious health condition or at risk for developing one. These two steps can increase personal health awareness among employees.
 - **Health assessments:** Employees complete a questionnaire about their health and lifestyle. As a result, employees can begin thinking about how changes could have a positive impact on their overall health.
 - **Biometric screenings:** Health professionals conduct brief exams of employees that include blood work, blood pressure and body mass index.

These two elements are perfect for companies just getting started with workplace wellness, because both elements are easy to manage and allow for risk stratification of any employee. Employees get easy access to information that will help them maintain good health or improve it if necessary. Employers receive aggregate health information that allows them to understand health risks that exist among their employees as a whole, such as the percentage of the employee population at risk for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and other ailments.

Which incentive is right for my organization?

The incentive your organization chooses should be appropriate to your company culture and, ideally, should link behavior changes to risk factor improvement and health cost containment. Incentives should also improve access to a better, lower-cost health plan or allow organizations and employees to avoid premium increases.

Effective incentive design is key to driving program participation, so incentive programs should be meaningful and rewarding to employees.

Viverae usually recommends a premium reduction for medical coverage because it connects the employees' actions to the program result - to reduce health care costs. However, other incentives may also be used:

- Merchandise such as company-branded clothing, coffee cups, water bottles and other items available through a reward catalog with a "point redemption for merchandise" approach. Employees earn points and the opportunity to redeem points right away or hold out for something bigger, which keeps the momentum going.
- Cash may seemingly be the easiest way to encourage participation, but research shows that for a reward to be effective and sustaining, it must be directly related to the desired behavior. Unfortunately, when cash is provided in a paycheck and taxes are deducted, the incentive loses its impact.
- Gift/debit cards are attractive to some employers because they are easy to administer, but some cards carry expiration fees and other restrictions.

- **Incentives:** Enrolling in the program allows employees to earn an award, such as a \$50/month premium credit that can be applied to their medical coverage. Depending on the business needs, other incentives can be effective. For more information about incentives, see the sidebar on page 3.
- **Program goal:** The goal is to drive participation. The health assessments and biometric screening results increase awareness of how employees' lifestyle choices can have an impact on their overall health. As employees understand the part they play, they can prepare to take action. Creating a culture of wellness is a gradual process, and increasing employee self-awareness is a vital first step to success.
- **Privacy:** Some employees may be skeptical about health assessments and screenings because they fear that their employers may have access to personal health information. Employees must understand that the health information they provide is completely confidential. An employer will never have access to personal health information, only the aggregate population information.
- **Benefits:** Enrollment programs yield two very important benefits, both of which are essential starting points for future success:
 - Employers obtain awareness of total population risk-factor status. This allows them to tailor programs to address the most significant health risks that the employee population faces.
 - Employees learn about their personal risk factors and receive information targeted on how to reduce those risks.

Engagement programs: Motivating employees and ensuring compliance

After employees begin to participate, the next step is using employees' increased awareness to motivate positive action. Targeted programs, activity challenges and education initiatives can encourage positive changes, such as managing weight and reducing risks that could potentially lead to dangerous and expensive-to-treat health conditions later.

- **Program elements:** Engagement programs also start with health assessments and biometric screenings. Successful completion of these elements is required before moving on to activities and compliance. However, these other elements promote healthy lifestyle behaviors, including:
 - **Preventive-care compliance:** All employees should be encouraged to undergo an annual physical, dental exam, flu immunization, skin cancer screening and vision screening. Women are also encouraged to undergo an annual well-woman exam. After age 40, employees are also encouraged to complete tests such as PSA exams for men and mammograms for women. After age 50, colonoscopies and osteoporosis screenings may also be encouraged.
 - **Risk-based coaching compliance:** Based on biometric results or family history, employees may be encouraged to complete appropriate screening, such as for cancer, heart disease and diabetes.
 - **Program activities:** Wellness activities and education opportunities provide occasions for

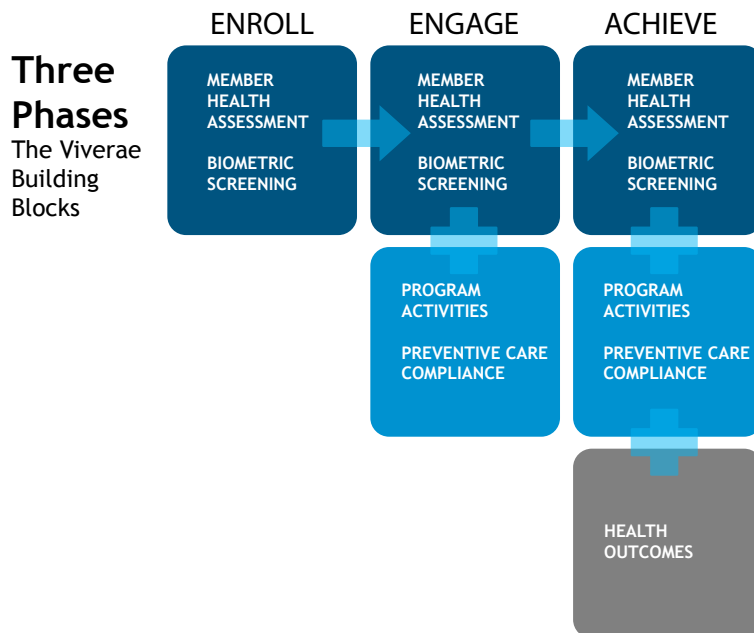
healthy and higher-risk employees to become actively involved in wellness. Over time, this engagement can generate healthy habits that are a routine part of their lifestyle. Activities include:

- Targeted programs such as weight management or tobacco cessation
- Quarterly health challenges that promote nutrition and physical activity
- Health tutorials and educational courses
- Community events such as 5K team marathon participation that allow employees to work toward goals together

• **Premium reductions** for employee medical coverage can be a powerful motivator for employees. The prospect of saving hundreds of dollars on medical coverage annually is an influential incentive for employees.

• **Advantages:** Not only can premium reductions get employees on board with a wellness initiative, they also have the ability to sustain interest over time. Also, there is a direct connection to the wellness program.

- **Disadvantages:** If the amount of the premium reduction is too small or too hard to earn, employees may not participate in the program. Also, if the reduction is too easy to earn too quickly, the program may have a hard time achieving desired lifestyle changes.
- **Program goal:** Some employees believe that workplace wellness programs only reward people who have health risks. However, a truly effective wellness program should engage the entire population in a fair way. Healthy people will find it easier to get an award, and it will be more challenging for high-risk employees. However, results should be achievable for everyone.
- **Benefits:** Getting employees to undergo annual physicals and to comply with recommended age- and gender-based screenings can help detect serious health conditions at an early stage, when they are easier - and less expensive - to treat. Engaging employees in wellness activities teaches them about the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Together, employees will better understand how to improve their employee health and help themselves (and the organization) reduce health care costs.



Achievement programs: Delivering better health outcomes and results you can see

As a wellness program matures, driving participation and increasing engagement lays the foundation for making a measurable positive impact on employee health. After employees make the conscious decision to get involved with wellness and once they understand the potential benefits, the stage is set to drive healthy outcomes. Offering an incentive reward for maintaining or improving health is an important part of designing an effective health management program.

- **Program elements:** The program elements from enrollment and engagement programs are the same but include an added dimension. The new twist is a metric that rewards employees based on favorable health outcomes such as reduced risk factors and improved biometrics. Healthy employees will find the incentive easier to achieve, but even higher-risk employees will find the reward achievable.
- **Incentive:** Offering an additional premium credit to apply toward medical coverage supports the goal to fully engage employees to put into practice the knowledge they have acquired and to exert additional effort.
- **Program goal:** Every employee, whether healthy or not, has the ability to improve their health and earn a reward. Low-risk employees can earn points for initial health status, while high-risk employees can earn points for health improvements over time. The fact that anyone can achieve these objectives reinforces a sense of community and creates a culture of health that perpetuates positive health behaviors over time.
- **Benefits:** Driving measurable outcomes that employees see in improved health and that organizations see in reduced health care costs are very tangible benefits. If an employee begins exercising and losing weight and finds that he or she is also able to discontinue taking blood pressure medication as a result, both the employee and the employer are big winners.

Steps to success: How to create a successful wellness program

In addition to developing a meaningful incentive program based on a progressive reward structure, there are additional key elements necessary to drive participation and program success:

- **Creating a culture of health:** Opportunities should exist every day to make good choices, such as healthy food options in vending machines or the employee cafeteria. These choices do not need to be expensive for the company. For example, not every company has an onsite gym, but most workplaces can provide safe opportunities to walk around the campus or up and down stairwells to get a few minutes of exercise. Changing everyone's mind-set in many small ways can add up to big results over time.
- **Getting support from senior management:** Business leaders within an organization must send a clear message to employees that workplace wellness is a business priority. Using effective communication methods, senior management should send a consistent message at the start, then reinforce this commitment on a regular basis. Without this support, the success of the program will be limited.

