Wellness support: peer-to-peer = results!

– Bryce Williams, Vice President, Well-Being
Blue Shield of California
Social ties and norms shape our health in many ways – from physical phenomena like eating or exercise, to emotional impacts such as depression or happiness. Why? One reason is that being surrounded by consistent health behaviors, positive or negative, can change what we perceive as the norm. Another possibility could be that people living or working in the same environment often share the same health influences, such as easy access to unhealthy food, which slowly become part of daily routines or methods of bonding.

We’re social by nature, so harnessing the power of peer support in the workplace is crucial to impacting engagement and accountability. Peer support as a component of your wellness strategy can help:

• Remove barriers to participation
• Support healthy habits, like having fruit instead of a sugary snack
• Increase enthusiasm and motivation
• Reduce feelings of stress or anxiety
• Heighten self-efficacy by boosting confidence in new behaviors
While financial incentives have their place in a corporate wellness program, in the current economy, compensating employees to improve their health can be cost-prohibitive for many employers. In addition, the effect can wear off quickly in that people expect increasing reward amounts for changing their behavior, and once the incentive is taken away, they may revert to their old habits.

A peer-to-peer engagement model creates powerful social incentives for long-lasting participation. Employees are much more likely to join a wellness program when invited by a colleague, thus reducing the recruitment effort required by the employer. And by removing barriers to participation, commitment is deepened when people feel they’re part of a team or have a health buddy to hold them accountable. So, instead of singling people or behavior out, you’re uniting them with the message that all employees share a mutual vision in creating a healthy company culture.

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A recent national survey shows 56% of employees say they either “strongly” or “moderately” agree that peers provide motivation and helpful support with health improvement efforts. And 55% agree that sharing their progress with peers helps them remain accountable.3

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Here are a few suggestions for introducing social support:

1. **Inspire a healthy, collaborative spirit** by setting up individual or team contests around nutrition, exercise, or smoking cessation. Hold a contest to develop a name or theme for the wellness programs to build excitement and ownership from the start. Go a step further and encourage family participation as well, because good health doesn’t just keep business hours.

2. **Encourage social groups based on common interests**, such as a Couch to 5K for newbie runners, a Weight Watchers at Work meeting, an informal golf league, or a healthy pregnancy support group. By uniting people based on common health goals, and empowering them to spread the word by inviting their colleagues to join, your programs can become its own grassroots communication strategy. And when learning how to begin a healthy lifestyle, having others there to answer questions, share experiences, or give a gentle push enables progress and long-term commitment.

3. **Commit resources and time during office hours** for educational opportunities, such as lunch & learns or workshops, or allow employees to take a short walk during their coffee break. This makes it not only social, but easy and convenient. When employees begin to make a shared commitment to being healthy, they begin to throw away traditions like “muffin Mondays” and start to bring fruit to the office, or take the stairs instead of the elevator.

4. **Get your organization together for a cause.** Find an activity-based charity event that everyone can get behind to raise money and awareness, as well as get healthy.

5. **Leverage social media and create a virtual identity for your wellness program.** Social gaming tools like Daily Challenge™ or Healthrageous™ provide variety, consistency, and camaraderie. These systems also already have the infrastructure to enable employees to invite, challenge, track, and motivate each other to achieve specific goals.

By uniting employees and encouraging them to make healthy commitments together, employers can harness this network effect to spread healthy behaviors at the workplace and increase the likelihood that employees will succeed.

Check out blueshieldca.com/realstories to see how the California State Teachers’ Retirement System (CalSTRS) and the California State Controller’s Office (SCO) utilized peer support and participation to track steps, lose weight, and build morale within the workplace.
Blue Shield is driving innovation across emerging channels with well-being platforms such as Healthrageous, ShapeUp, Daily Challenge, and the newly launched Walkadoo to empower peer-to-peer coaching. Using social media architecture and advanced game theory design, these programs connect individuals to their friends, families, and colleagues with engaging Web or smart phone apps so that wellness solutions are available 24/7.

“Our goal is to use rapid prototyping to deliver relevant, attention-grabbing programming that makes it easy, social, and fun to be healthy,” states Bryce Williams, vice president of well-being at Blue Shield. “The results reflect tangible improvements in employee engagement and health status.”

The Daily Challenge, for instance, delivers a health goal for each day. The premise is that too often health goals are unrealistic or overwhelming, so the Daily Challenge focuses on small, everyday activities that can improve well-being. The gaming mechanics allow participants to collect tokens and earn points to unlock different content tracks.

Participants note when they’ve accomplished the challenge and can share tips or encourage others within the platform or even on Facebook.

Blue Shield’s Daily Challenge experience has shown that enhanced social connections and peer coaching drive long-term engagement (>90% at six months) and well-being scores 20% greater than California averages.

Blue Shield employees also can participate in Shape Up Shield, a social media-fueled challenge that lets employees form teams, set group fitness goals, post comments, and give virtual “high fives” for encouragement. As a result, employees in this program have walked over 300,000 miles.
While self-reported data from the Daily Challenge and Shape Up Shield is valuable, Blue Shield also is increasingly focused on objective, validated measures of health improvement. Beyond biometric screening data, Blue Shield is taking a market-leading position in mobile/wireless accelerometer technology to drive and validate increased physical activity with its latest platforms, Healthrageous and Walkadoo. Participants in these programs wear a device that tracks steps as well as other advanced measures such as sleep patterns, and tracks that information when they walk by a sync station within the building.

By combining health management, digital coaching, and gaming dynamics, Blue Shield is not only delivering measurable financial healthcare returns, but helping employees live healthier, more fulfilling lives.

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3. Workforce Management magazine/Virgin HealthMiles, Inc. study, Apr/May 2012.
4. These platforms are independent companies from Blue Shield of California and Blue Shield does not provide products or services. Healthrageous is based on technologies developed at the Center for Connected Health, a division of Partners HealthCare. ShapeUp is an employer program of ShapelUp, Inc. Daily Challenge and Walkadoo are programs of MeYou Health, a Healthways, Inc. company.
5. For all Daily Challenge users in California, the average well-being score is 65.98. Blue Shield and the Shield symbol are registered marks of the BlueShield Association.