

# Building a Culture of Health **FROM THE INSIDE OUT**

*This article is the first in a series from Dr. Richard Safer, the Chief Medical Director of Employee Health and Well-being for Johns Hopkins Medicine*



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aving worked with large employers over the span of two decades, here's the number one mistake I see: employers placing all of the blame for unhealthy habits and chronic diseases on the shoulders of the employees.

Sure, these unhealthy habits and chronic diseases are certainly on the rise, and definitely cause for concern. But this dismal picture didn't just pop up overnight. And yes, our health is a result of our own decisions. Yet nobody talks about the influence of our culture on those decisions.

Certainly, employers rarely think about what role they've played in the decline of their workforce well-being, even as Americans spend an average of 90,000 hours at work in their lifetimes. By looking at their own role, employers have the chance to develop a work environment that makes healthy behaviors easy, happenstance and fulfilling for all employees.

To put it simply, workplaces need to focus on creating a *culture* of health. Building a culture of health from the inside out gives workplaces the opportunity to tackle some of the most common health problems, from high blood pressure and diabetes to stress and mental wellbeing. Health programs will only help a few. But by reimagining the workplace as a center of wellbeing, employees won't have to 'sign up' for a program to benefit. Employees can become healthier just by being part of their workplace community.

This vision is far from a utopia. At Johns Hopkins Medicine, we've developed a "Culture of Health" approach to make it easier for our employees to be "Healthy at Hopkins." We're moving beyond individual interventions towards something bigger.

By examining key aspects of the culture at Hopkins, we've been able to implement a wide range of strategies across 11 entities. In partnership with Wellness Corporate Solutions (WCS), a wellness vendor that supports comprehensive program management and on-site activities, we've been able to support our employee population and achieve meaningful cultural shifts. Many of the strategies we've implemented could apply across any workplace – as a proven approach to developing a healthy, thriving workforce.

## WHAT IS A CULTURE OF HEALTH?


"Culture" is a broad term that is useful because its best definition encompasses behaviors and beliefs. That is, a culture is more than just the environment you

find yourself in – it's all of the traditions, norms, behaviors, practices, and beliefs that influence the people in a community. At Hopkins, we are defining "Culture of Health" as a "web of social influences that manifests itself in shared healthy beliefs and behaviors."

There are four main reasons that focusing on building a healthy culture is a strategic approach.

- 1) **Inclusivity.** HR leaders always want to see high participation rates in their wellness programs, to reap the full benefits of a healthy population. When a wellness program is building a culture of health, employees don't have to enroll or complete a specific action to "participate" – they are able to adopt and sustain healthy behaviors and positive feelings just from existing in a health-forward environment.

At Hopkins entities, we've incorporated ways for employees to be healthy as they go about their regular day. Simple messaging has gone a long way. We've added signs pointing towards building staircases and have built walking paths into the design of some of our buildings. The message is built right into employees' daily routines.



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Many of the tactics that make a culture of health inclusive are simple. As another example, we've made it a policy to always offer fruit or another healthy choice when serving snacks or desserts at meetings. We've also made it part of our company culture to take walking meetings instead of the traditional sitting around a table. We look for ways that employees can accomplish a goal they already have – moving from one place to another, connecting in person, getting a mid-day pick-me-up – in a healthier way.

- 2) **Highlighting what's important to our leaders.** Population health trends in the right direction when individuals can maintain healthier behaviors over the long-term. Short-term change is a start, but sustainable lifestyle changes are the goal. This is easier when the workplace culture consistently provides positive reinforcement for healthy habits.

Building a community of health is important, which is why we have an annual walking program that brings employees together to support each other to increase their physical activity level. We work with WCS to distribute awards for the top steppers in our step challenges. It's important to show that employees have institutional support when they go the extra mile – whether literally as their steps increase, or in any of the ways that they reach new health milestones. We are sure to have our executives share a picture with our top steppers!

- 3) **Helping employees succeed.** It's both intuitive and proven that peer support helps with any lifestyle change. People who want to lose weight or meet another health goal often succeed if their friends or family are on that journey with them.

A network of wellness champions is a great way to showcase this principle. In collaboration with WCS, who has supported wellness champions worldwide, we've built a strong champion program where Hopkins employees volunteer to be peer leaders. They undergo training and collect feedback from their colleagues about how Healthy at Hopkins is supporting them. Messaging to employees about healthy behavior isn't only coming from "Hopkins" as an abstract institution – it's coming from their coworkers, who are on the same journey alongside them.



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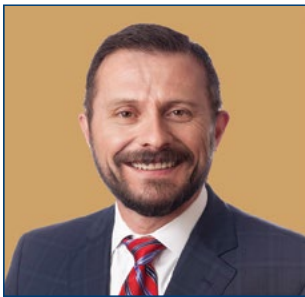
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And indeed, this feeling of success is taking root. 70% of employees who completed the employee interest survey agreed that engaging in Healthy at Hopkins initiatives have helped to improve or maintain their health and wellbeing.

- 4) **Building a positive atmosphere.** Physical, emotional, and mental health are all interrelated. When employees are coming together and building a supportive environment, there are “feel good” benefits that come from helping each other. Growing a life-affirming atmosphere with momentum in a positive direction can boost morale, leading to better health and higher productivity.

One of our ongoing efforts with our wellness partner has been collecting and sharing success stories from across our entities with our employee population.

Last year, we featured 27 of these stories on an online portal so that examples of peers reaching their goals are always at employees' fingertips. They span topics from “How I Reversed My Hypertension” to “How I Make Healthy Choice Throughout the Day,” offering relatable content that creates a positive ripple effect throughout the community.

Some employees also like to learn new skills and information

alongside their coworkers. For this reason, we always have opportunities for groups to engage in together, like fitness and nutrition classes. Our collaborator has helped design many of these opportunities to reinforce the day-to-day healthy atmosphere at Hopkins, showing the role that a strategic wellness partner can have in emphasizing a culture of health.

### WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF A CULTURE OF HEALTH?

So what constitutes this web of social influences? By breaking down the different spheres of cultural influence, workplaces can implement a range of strategies that reinforce each other to build a culture of health.



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The six spheres of influence that have informed the Healthy at Hopkins strategy are Leadership Support, Shared Values, Norms, Peer Support, Touch Points, and Social Climate.

In future articles in this series, I will explore how each of these spheres represent opportunities to build a sustainable culture of health at any organization. ■

Dr. Safer is the Chief Medical Director of Employee Health and Well-being for Johns Hopkins Medicine. In this role, he leads the Healthy at Hopkins employee health and well-being strategy. He also currently sees patients in the Johns Hopkins Hospital Pediatric Cardiology department. In addition, he teaches in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Richard completed his Bachelor of Science in Nutritional Biochemistry at Cornell University before graduating from medical school at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He completed his residency in Family Medicine at Franklin Square Hospital Center, in Baltimore, Maryland. After which, he completed a Faculty Development Fellowship at the Virginia Commonwealth University. He is also certified in Clinical Lipidology by the National Lipid Association. Prior to arriving at Hopkins, Dr. Safer practiced family medicine in Northern Virginia.

He was then on faculty at the George Washington University, where he served as the Residency Director of the Family Medicine training program prior to his departure. He was the Medical Director of an Occupational Health Center in Baltimore and Wellness Director for the Mid-Atlantic region of the parent company, just before starting at CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield in Baltimore, Maryland as the Medical Director of Preventive Medicine. He recently finished serving on the Board of Directors for the American College of Lifestyle Medicine.




Richard achieved Fellowship status in the American Academy of Family Medicine, the American College of Preventive Medicine and the American College of Lifestyle Medicine. He is a Diplomate of both the American Board of Lifestyle Medicine as well as the American Board of Family Medicine.



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