

What Kind of Leadership Builds a Culture of Health?

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

In January's issue, I explained how employers often overlook something key to building a thriving, healthy workplace: the workplace culture itself. Employers have a direct role to play in building a culture that supports healthy behaviors across the organization.

At Johns Hopkins Medicine, we've built an entire strategy around analyzing the factors that influence people's health, and then making sure we are creating the conditions employees need for wellbeing. Our "Healthy at Hopkins" initiative has helped shed light on the different spheres of influence that contribute to a culture of health.

One of those spheres of influence is leadership support, which has both obvious and more subtle implications for employee wellbeing. Leaders set policies and sign off on wellness initiatives, but they also model behavior and are the stewards of any strong workplace culture.



Written By Dr. Richard Safeer

Effective leaders make course corrections when the culture is off, gather feedback from employees, and most importantly, invest in a positive vision for the organization.

One of the best ways to help leadership support a culture of health is to define strategies for different types of leadership roles. Different roles bring different opportunities to introduce, grow, and sustain a focus on health, so it's worth considering what part each type of leader has to play.

WHERE DOES LEADERSHIP SUPPORT COME FROM?

It's important to consider who leaders are in organizations. Executives, directors, and managers have titles and responsibilities that make them formal leaders in the workplace, and they have opportunities to promote wellbeing from the top down.

But every workplace also has informal leaders—employees who are mentors and role models, have a strong and influential voice within their teams and departments, and who play an active role in shaping the workplace culture because of those traits.

Different levels of leadership also have different touch points with employees, opening up a wide range of opportunities to grow a culture of health. Making a culture of health the shared responsibility of all levels and types of leaders ultimately results in a more resilient workplace.

SETTING STANDARDS, MODELING BEHAVIOR, AND PRIORITIZING HEALTH

1. Senior executives

Executive-level support for wellness programs is critical. Senior executives establish an organization's priorities and help set the tone for all employees. Not only do executives have the power to "green light" wellness initiatives, but they are also some of the most visible members of an organization. Their physical presence, written and verbal communication, and participation in healthy activities sends a strong message about the organization's values.

The other way executives can build a culture of health is by establishing goals around employee health as they would with any other business target. An organization sets priorities by developing a set of goals, financial targets, operational benchmarks, and other business objectives.

Establishing formal goals around a healthy workplace not only provides motivation for departments to participate but also gives leadership a reason to check back in on progress and devote resources to the effort.

2. Mid-level managers

The power of leadership in building a healthy culture is far from limited to the top. In fact, mid-level managers may have the greatest opportunity to make a difference "on the ground" of an organization.





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By mid-level managers, I'm referring to supervisors who often have a group of direct reports and work closely with a large number of employees every day. At Hopkins, supervisors have successfully used a range of strategies to help promote a culture of health.

One of the clearest and simplest actions is to put 'Healthy at Hopkins' on the team agenda. This way, every week they are reminded to promote upcoming events and health resources. Sometimes, a manager taking time to put these resources in front of an employee is a strong way to signal the importance of wellbeing.

It's also important that managers create and maintain space for health at work. That includes allowing time for healthy habits, including formal wellness programming and self-guided moments for mental health breaks and physical activity. Many of our most successful managers don't just allow this kind of time, but actively encourage it and provide positive feedback to employees when they engage in healthy behaviors at work.

Managers should take an active interest in their team members' physical and mental health. At Hopkins, we train new managers on how to be a buffer against stress, not to be a source of stress. A manager that is a source of stress is critical, blaming, unclear, and unsupportive.

Managers that buffer against stress can still set ambitious goals for their team and provide important structure and guidance – but they do so by modeling transparency, openness, and understanding. Managers need to not only work to reduce employees' stress, but also focus on their own mental health and wellbeing to avoid a toxic culture.

Managers also have the opportunity to influence employees' approach to work-life integration. They can guide employees to adopt the same healthy habits at the office as they do at home and can also advocate for healthy habits beyond the workplace – such as “unplugged” time away from digital devices and taking restful PTO as needed.

3. Peer leaders

Last, there are many other leaders within an organization whose influence is unrelated to their official title. Often these are employees who have a strong or magnetic personality, or who have earned particularly deep trust from their coworkers.

These informal leaders have great influence over their peers, whether that is taking an agreed upon work break or talking about a fitness class they attended. Peer leaders are a critical part of an organization's social climate, which is where a culture of health can really take root.

It's also possible to inspire employees to become peer leaders through champion programs. At Hopkins, we've designed a program where a select group of employees—regardless of title or position at the organization—apply to be wellbeing champions, and then undergo training on how to explain health resources and promote opportunities to participate in a healthy culture.

Overall, champion programs highlight another important truth about building a culture of health: this undertaking not only requires leaders, but also creates leaders. Good leaders help promote a healthy culture – and a healthy culture also gives rise to peers, managers, and executives who have a positive influence over the organization.

A Culture of Health

So, while there is absolutely a strong top-down component to building a culture of health, this process can also create room for new leaders to emerge and for peers to impact each other for the better every step of the way.

In the next piece in the series, I'll explore how shared values – which again, often start with the leaders I've discussed in this piece – are another key sphere of influence when it comes to growing a healthy workplace culture. ■

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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. Safeer 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.



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