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Making Wellness Stick

LEADERSHIP AND WELLNESS COACH, GAIL VOISIN, EXPLAINS HOW TO THINK (WAY) BEYOND PROGRAMS FOR A HEALTHIER, HAPPIER AND MORE PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE



A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black blazer, is resting her head on a red mug. She is looking down at a desk with various business charts and documents. The text "Making Wellness Stick" is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

Making Wellness Stick



HR PROFESSIONAL SPEAKS WITH LEADERSHIP AND WELLNESS COACH GAIL VOISIN ON HOW TO THINK (WAY) BEYOND PROGRAMS FOR A HEALTHIER, HAPPIER AND MORE PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

By Melissa Campeau



Leadership and wellness coach, Gail Voisin

Many organizations will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on developing and implementing corporate wellness only to be faced with waning enthusiasm and interest just a short while down the road. That's a huge missed opportunity since wellness, when done right and effectively sustained, boosts employees' overall health and helps an organization save money and reap greater profits.

What's missing in many cases is a holistic approach to wellness. According to an Ivey Business School report published in 2015 (see sidebar), there are several big-picture factors critical for the success of corporate wellness. They include business strategy alignment, a supportive environment and organizational culture.

TOTAL BALANCE AND INTEGRATION MODEL



Chart and author photo courtesy of Gail Voisin

How employees are able to manage stress is an important aspect of wellness

BIG-PICTURE FACTORS INFLUENCING ORGANIZATIONAL WELLNESS

The Ivey Business School at Western University published a report in 2015 on organizational wellness, called “Behaviours Drive Workplace Wellness Program Results.” The authors proposed that senior management involvement and leadership were keys to ensuring the success and sustainability of workplace wellness. The paper highlighted several key areas of influence, including:

Business strategy alignment. Management should have goals and plans that align with the organization’s strategy. They should also campaign for the development of employee health and set annual objectives for employee wellness improvement.

Supportive environment. Supervisor support must be visibly evident to employees. That can take the form of incentives for healthy choices, integration of health benefits or the development of committees offering support for employees participating in wellness programs.

Organizational culture. Senior management’s values about workplace wellness can help to establish a culture in which employees are encouraged to participate in the firm’s health initiatives.

Communicate clearly and frequently. CEOs who regularly and effectively communicate the message of workplace wellness programs tend to have more successful outcomes.

Management seen to participate. In order to have legitimacy in promoting wellness to employees, senior managers need to embrace health as a personal priority.

Delegate responsibilities. The more people who take on formal responsibilities for the organization’s wellness initiative, the more likely it is to succeed over time and the more likely it is to become part of the organization’s culture.

To read the full report, visit: bit.ly/bdwwpr-report.

Gail Voisin, executive leadership and lifestyle/wellness coach, quite literally wrote the book on this subject (*All Together Now: Vision, Leadership and Wellness*) – four years before the Ivey Business School published their research results. Voisin’s model is unique and makes the case that by aligning vision, leadership and wellness, both personally and organizationally, leaders naturally position themselves and their businesses to achieve extraordinary success.

HR Professional recently caught up with Voisin to learn more about how organizations can make effective, sustainable wellness happen.

How do you define personal wellness?

Gail Voisin: I would define it as having a healthy mind and body that can consistently sustain the energy reserves you need – not just to navigate the day to day, but also to meet exceptional circumstances beyond your control, both in business and family life.

Why should organizations make employees’ wellness a priority?

GV: Wellness sustains performance and sets employees up for extraordinary success. It’s like nudging the rudder of a large ship; just a small change can make a dramatic improvement in life’s long-term course.

“WELLNESS SUSTAINS PERFORMANCE AND SETS EMPLOYEES UP FOR EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS.”

– GAIL VOISIN



Courtesy of Gail Voisin



Best practices include solid health benefits such as subsidized fitness programs for employees

What roles do leaders play in corporate wellness?

GV: Leaders have both a personal and organizational role to play. Often part of the magic to make corporate wellness stick is in the behaviour modelling of the leaders. Personally, they need to make wellness a lifestyle habit and model these behaviours. Organizationally, they need to promote and support the corporate wellness values in the organization. Whether they realize it or not, leaders help organizations and employees set boundaries because their actions define what wellness means to the organization.

Some examples of how leaders can help set organizational boundaries are when they or their employees are pulled in many different directions by competing obligations. Leaders need to help establish boundaries between work and home life, their social life, sports and hobbies. Organizations with strong corporate wellness values will have leaders who follow protocols to help with this, particularly around the use of mobile phones and other portable communication devices.

This technology certainly has its place – making communication more efficient and instantaneous, especially for those whose positions require frequent travel. However, the expectation shouldn't be that an employee is therefore available 24/7, since this runs counter to the concepts of individual wellness and work-life integration. These devices can promote a culture of workaholism which isn't sustainable, either individually or organizationally, especially given the value and beliefs of many of the current generation and virtually all of the next generation of leaders.

What areas can an organization consider addressing to better support organizational wellness?

GV: There's no one-size-fits-all answer. However, it starts with ensuring leaders are trained on the importance of wellness so they can develop their own wellness strategies to be prepared to foster a culture that promotes wellness among their employees.

Best practices include solid health benefits, including a fitness centre or subsidized fitness program, employee assistance programs, training and development, career transition assistance if an employee is downsized and so on. This type of support helps take both leaders and staff members to a whole new quality of life in sustaining wellness.

To make Canada's Top 100 employers list, organizations are rated on the basis of eight different categories: Physical workspace; work atmosphere and social; health, financial and family benefits; vacation and time off; employee communications; performance management; training and skills development; and community involvement. These categories are a good match for what most employees look for in organizational wellness.

What role does stress management play in organizational wellness?

GV: How employees are able to manage stress is an important aspect of wellness. The harsh reality is that a great majority of our illnesses are stress related. Dr. Dean Ornish has done more than three decades of research demonstrating that comprehensive

changes to lifestyle can begin to reverse even severe health problems without drugs or surgery. He points out that stress causes your arteries to constrict. It can cause arterial blockages to build up faster, your heart to beat irregularly and blood clots to form that can cause a heart attack.

The good news: It's not the stressors that are important so much as how you react to them. If you practice some simple stress management techniques you can be in the same job, in the same environment and not have it affect you in the same way.

That's important because when employees are highly stressed it can lead to more absenteeism, sickness and medical drugs, and eventually to short-term disability, long-term disability and so on. Healthy employees who can effectively manage their stress require fewer dollars spent on their health and benefit programs. By integrating wellness into an organization, it helps employees to gradually change unhealthy behaviours, which can lead not only to reduced health-care costs, but also a healthier and more productive workforce.

“LEADERS NEED TO HELP ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME LIFE, THEIR SOCIAL LIFE, SPORTS AND HOBBIES.”

— GAIL VOISIN

In your book, you emphasize the importance of work-life integration. Why is that important for personal and organizational success?

GV: In today's fast-paced business world, life is a blur between work and home. Workers might simply be stressed out with too many hours of overtime and not enough physical activity or sleep. They might be struggling to meet a project deadline or attempting to support an ailing parent. Whether they are under stress at home or at work, when they switch environments, their stress carries over. If the environment at work is not a healthy one, it wreaks havoc with their health and their ability to be a high performer. If the pressures at home are too great – and there's no support from the organization by way of an employee assistance program, for example – then performance will suffer, as well.

When an organization hires someone, they hire the whole person. Whatever challenges or problems that person faces can directly or indirectly impact the culture, teams and performance within the organization. That can require purposeful action to set boundaries.

Lifestyle management involves getting in tune with yourself and making choices. Most people will always have stressors in their lives. However, employees who master lifestyle management and put a priority on personal wellness will have a much greater resilience to respond to or reduce stress.

How does a wellness culture impact recruiting and retention?

GV: In general, the younger generation is taking more of an active interest in improving their health. They are seeking organizations that are willing to support and invest in health care. In fact, the new generation is familiar with the phrase “our health is our wealth.” As a result, it's now even more of a priority for progressive organizations hiring senior-level staff to not only provide executive coaching services for leadership development, but also to provide executive coaching services in lifestyle management and wellness to attract and retain top talent.

Likewise, the organization needs to do its due diligence in the selection process to ensure that the employee not only has the knowledge and skills to excel, but also has a positive, healthy attitude and is a good fit for the organization, is supportive of wellness and will be a role model for staff.

This growing focus on health and wellness isn't exclusive to younger employees. Executives today are more health conscious and educated about health issues. They are more knowledgeable and better equipped to understand and appreciate the value of work-life integration to attain a high quality of life and sustain high levels of performance at work.

Who is responsible for organizational wellness?

GV: Sometimes corporate executives think the human resources function should be responsible and accountable for organizational wellness. HR is often involved in researching topics related to organizational wellness, especially in leading edge organizations. More importantly it is the role of HR to strategically position organizational wellness. However, it's the CEO and the entire senior management team who are responsible and accountable for organizational wellness, from buying into the concept to supporting organizational wellness, to being role models in integrating their decisions into the day-to-day business operations.

How can an organization ensure they're making strides toward better wellness?

GV: The only way to ensure progress for better wellness is to measure the impact of your corporate wellness culture. An effective corporate wellness culture is highly customized, based on what works best for each individual organization and its employees. Some examples: It can include measuring the impact of the past versus current wellness culture of your existing employees, based on data gathered in an employee survey. You can also measure the ability of your organization to attract and retain talent; measuring results of activities and participation linked to corporate wellness. The important thing is to have all the areas of corporate wellness embedded in the strategic business plan.

For the most part, making strides towards better wellness is a process of continuing to build on corporate wellness and it takes time and patience. That is, whatever aspects work extremely well for your organization, you then want to do more of. Along the way you'll also consider what adjustments have to be made to make it better.

The progress is most apparent when wellness becomes part of the strategic business plan and the personal visions of the leaders are solidly linked to an organization's vision. That's critical



An effective corporate wellness culture is highly customized, based on what works best for each individual organization and its employees, says executive leadership and lifestyle/wellness coach Gail Voisin

because if it's part of the strategic business plan, it signals a strong senior leadership commitment. What gets measured gets done! It's no longer a nebulous idea. If senior leaders are supported in achieving specific results when it comes to wellness – and an element of their compensation is tied to it – it also stands to reason that an organization is much more likely to see positive results.

Any final thoughts on the subject you'd like to share?

GV: In my experience in coaching senior executives in Fortune 1000 corporations, I've learned that we need to focus on leaders and their behaviours when it comes to creating a culture of wellness. Leaders need to make wellness a lifelong habit; organizations need to have a clear focus on wellness in their business plans, vision, values and employee-based initiatives, thereby creating a culture that values and promotes wellness. This means that leaders must actively be role models through their behaviours demonstrating that they are committed to wellness organizationally and personally. It's about actions, not words. My belief has now been supported in the Ivey Business School white paper, as well.

Leaders and employees are then better able to maximize their skills and potential and apply them on the job. Wellness also

makes good business sense from an attraction and retention perspective, which adds up to dollars and cents and a greater ROI.

Imagine this: You are in great physical shape and feel good. You have a partner or spouse, family and friends who matter to you. You have time for yourself and time for them. You excel at work and you enjoy developing your successors. Your results have incredible impact on the organization. You go to work with passion and you come home with passion. You find time for your hobby, sports, fitness and other interests. You have more to give others, yet it doesn't seem like you need to expend all your energy. You have more time for community involvement and the more you give, the better you naturally feel. You are engaged and empowered, and your enthusiasm is contagious.

Now imagine you have a workforce full of leaders and employees who feel like this, thanks to a culture that supports and promotes wellness. How powerful could that be, and how limitless are the possibilities? ■

Gail Voisin is an executive leadership and lifestyle/wellness coach and author of All Together Now: Vision, Leadership and Wellness (Dundurn Press, 2011). She's been helping businesses across North America develop, implement and sustain thriving wellness cultures for decades.