Healthy WorkLife
an online resource for Wellness managers

All It Takes is One Person to Start a Wellness Trend

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A few of you may remember how popular the Wallabee shoe was in the '60s. But even if you were too young back then to remember such things (or not even born yet!), many of you will recognize the Wallabee name because the shoe came back into vogue not too long ago – and *not* because the shoe manufacturer decided to bring it back.

Researchers discovered that the shoe's comeback could be traced to one person in New York City, who purchased a pair of used Wallabees in a second-hand shop. He wasn't just any person. He was influential – a trendsetter who had friends in high places and a following of edgy, fashion-conscious hipsters.

After he started wearing the Wallabees, his inner circle of followers began raiding New York's popular vintage clothing stores, demanding and buying up all of the old pairs of Wallabees, and then the trend started spreading like wildfire. Suddenly, everybody wanted a pair, and people began flooding the original manufacturer with requests that the product line be reopened.

This is an example of how trends get started. One person is followed by a second tier of trendsetters who permeate the culture with the new trend. It also demonstrates how just one person with social influence has the power to start a whole new movement that can lead to a paradigm shift within a corporate culture.

This same type of phenomenon can occur in your wellness program when one person who others look up to starts taking a walk at lunchtime, bringing healthy food for lunch or abstaining from donuts at a meeting. In a purposeful way, you can create a healthy "in-crowd" by finding and encouraging the trendsetters in your population to be your Wellness Champions.

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Characteristics of a Trendsetter

Trendsetters are what I call "social mavens" – natural leaders who draw followers not because of their position within a hierarchy, but because they have certain qualities that attract people.
They're engaging, fun and personable, always at the center of a crowd. They're the ones with the good story. They're positive and energetic. They have a passion for pursuing things that make them feel and look good. They're the informal leader at a meeting before the boss arrives – the ones controlling the conversation before the formal leader takes over, and sometimes the ones to indirectly control the meeting even when the boss is present.

Keep in mind that not all trendsetters are positive. Some are negative. They may be engaging and stand out but tend to be pessimistic and influence people to look at things in a negative way. They will add dead weight to your wellness champion network. You want to find the positive trendsetters – the ones who are driven toward good purposes.

Engaging the Social Mavens

How do you make this happen? There is a plan for this, and it's simple. You start paying attention. You start looking for the social mavens within your culture. You seek them out, make friends with them, enter a social relationship or affinity, and when the moment is right, ask them if they would be interested in applying their positivity and enthusiasm as a wellness champion.

Here are some steps based on motivational interviewing techniques that can help you get started after you identify a trendsetter:

- Seek them out first to get to know them. Find out if they have enthusiasm for health and wellness. If they do, develop a positive association.
- Learn about their passions, what motivates them. Trendsetters tend to be motivated and goal-oriented. Get them talking about how they reach their goals.
- Plant seeds, e.g., tell them you could use someone like them to help others in the population.
- If they seem interested, initiate the wellness champion conversation.
- Don't come on too strong, as trendsetters are alpha people. You can't engage them by giving them a directive. You need to make a connection with them that feels supportive and genuine.
- Take your time to get to know them; it may not happen overnight.

The main thing is this conversation can happen in a million ways; it's not a formula but a free-flowing encounter.

It Takes Patience

With a little time and patience, you will eventually develop a network of enthusiastic, highly energetic advocates for your cause, who will become the new culture-of-health trendsetters for your organization. As the disciples of your trendsetters start to adopt the trendsetter's healthy habits, they get noticed by

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an outer circle of people. It's almost like throwing a stone into a pond and watching the ripples flow out from the big splash. A second stage is to ask champions to recruit new champions. Social mavens are very adept at bringing people on board. That's how you build a strong network.

Currently at Scripps Health, we have 125 wellness champions across five hospitals with 13,000 employees. The overall health risk has gone down every year, and this year we saw a lot of new participants with a higher level of risk enroll in the program, which means we are starting to reach the more reluctant folks. Scripps Health has been named AARP's 2011 Best Employer for Workers Over 50 and also was ranked No. 11 on Working Mothers' 100 Best Companies list. In the surveys, the wellness program was mentioned as a leading factor.

Wellness has now become such a part of our culture at Scripps that we can now focus on developing a more mature program – one that goes far beyond just improving health and costs, to one that focuses on elevating people's experience of life. For it is the lack of an overall positive life experience that leads so many to the perils of poor lifestyle habits.



About the Author

Hamilton Mears, PT, MTC, FABC is the architect and current administrator of the nationally recognized wellness program at Scripps Health, a San Diego-based healthcare system in Southern California, with 13,000 employees across five hospital campuses, 22 clinics and several administrative locations.

Prior to being asked to develop a wellness program for employees, he managed rehabilitation services for Scripps' largest hospital. Hamilton earned degrees in biology, physical education and physical therapy at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He is a Fellow of the Advisory Board Company, a healthcare think tank in Washington, DC., and has a long-standing interest in understanding the psychosocial factors that influence human behavior.

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