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Viewing Corporate Wellness Programs as Systems

Susan R. Madsen, Utah Valley State College, U.S.A.

Although interest in corporate wellness continues to increase in workplaces in various countries, many businesses still consider employee wellness as unrelated to the organization and its functions. Some continue to view wellness as having little or no financial impact on an organization and, therefore, not part of the overall organizational system. This paper argues that wellness programming should be analyzed as both a freestanding system and also a subsystem of the overall business. By viewing it through the general systems theoretical lens, the wellness system can find its place and be ultimately seen as integral within the overall organizational system.

Introduction

Although interest in corporate wellness programs continues to increase among many employers in various countries (Ho, 1997; Leonard, 2001; Martínez, 1999), the majority of businesses still consider wellness as an element or component not related or directly associated with the organization and its functions. Wellness continues to be viewed by some as a program that has little financial impact on an organization and, therefore, is not considered part of the overall organizational system (Goldstein, 1992; Schaefer, 1996). This paper argues that wellness programming should be analyzed as both a freestanding system and also a subsystem of the overall business. In addition, it argues that by viewing it through the general systems theoretical lens, the wellness system can find its place and be ultimately seen as integral within the overall organizational system.

First, a brief review of the general systems theoretical framework is presented. Second, wellness and its programs are described and discussed. Third, there are many problems, issues, and challenges inherent in corporate wellness programs. These issues and challenges are investigated and analyzed as they relate to the actual system by considering and understanding the following: 1) corporate wellness training cost-benefit; 2) stakeholders, true cost, and benefits; 3) the strategic link; 4) inputs, processes, and outcomes; 5) systems change; and 6) curriculum, instruction and learners. Fourth, the reasons wellness programs should be viewed as part of the overall organization are discussed. Finally, an ideal framework for viewing wellness as part of the overall organization is presented.

Theoretical Framework

General Systems Theory (GST) provides a strong theoretical framework for this paper. According to Skyttner (1996), GST “deals on an abstract level with general properties of systems, regardless of physical form or domain of application” (p. 24). GST was founded on the assumption that “all kinds of systems (concrete, conceptual, abstract, natural or man-made) had characteristics in common regardless of their internal nature” (p. 24). Many theorists (e.g., Bertalanffy, Litterer) have formulated the characteristics or hallmarks of the GST (Skyttner, 1996). These include interrelations and interdependence of objects and their attributes, holism, goal seeking, transformation process, inputs and outputs, entropy, regulation, hierarchy, differentiation, and equipifinality and multifinality. These characteristics provide a foundation for the notion that viewing wellness as a subsystem can affect its overall effectiveness. For example, the GST characteristic of hierarchy states that one system may be contained within another system. Systems are generally complex wholes made up of smaller subsystems which is sometimes referred to as the “nesting of systems” (Skyttner, 1996, p. 33).

It is important to understand what a system actually is. A system is an entity that has a purpose, function, or goal. A corporate wellness program has these characteristics. In addition, a system is comprised of parts that work together and interact with the outside environment. Of course, the purpose of a system is to provide some kind of output. Ruona (1998) defined a system as "a collection of elements where the performance of the whole is affected by every one of the parts and the way that any part affects the whole depends on what at least one other part is doing" (p. 890). So, an effective corporate wellness program performs by providing an output that is valued by the organization and fulfills or accomplishes something that is expected. It is also composed of a collection of elements that are dependent on each other to affect the corporate wellness system as a whole.

Swanson (1997) explained that systems theory recognizes "purpose, pieces, and relationships that can maximize or strangle systems and sub-systems" (p. 7). A corporate wellness program is not only a contemporary system in today's corporate world, but is also a subsystem in the overall corporate system. Understanding and analyzing a wellness program’s purpose, pieces,
relationships, and roles, helps to identify and address issues, challenges, and possible solutions. One of the major struggles corporate wellness has is its tendency to operate as a separate system and not as a subsystem in the larger organization. Many existing wellness programs do not even attempt—let alone succeed—in linking themselves to the overall corporate system. This struggle also extends to the corporate wellness role as a subsystem in other systems. Peterson (1998), as well as Stokols, Pelletier, and Fielding (1995) argued that corporate wellness programs are also subsystems in a truly integrated healthcare system. The scope of this paper, however, is limited to its relationships with and within a corporate setting.

**Workplace Wellness**

To understand the system of corporate wellness programs, one must first understand what wellness is, how it fits into the workplace, what its benefits are, and why organizations should take responsibility for assisting employees in this area.

Wellness is the “process of living at one’s highest possible level as a whole person” (Schafer, 1996, p. 33). It is the “integration of many dimensions, including emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social, that expands one’s potential to live and work effectively and to make a significant contribution to society” (Corbin & Lindsey, 1994, p. 233). Each of these wellness dimensions is essential in creating individual wellness (see Table 1). Wellness in the workplace refers to all programs and interventions an organization provides to employees that can assist them in improving themselves in any of these dimensions. Programs include such interventions as communication and awareness training programs, screening and assessment programs, education and lifestyle programs, and behavior change and support systems. A more comprehensive list can be found in Table 2.

**Table 1. Wellness Dimensions and Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wellness Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Includes an employee’s ability to cope with daily circumstances; to deal with personal feelings in a positive, optimistic, and constructive manner; to remain aware of one’s emotions at any given time; and to maintain a relatively even emotional state with moderate emotional responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Includes an employee’s ability to think clearly, independently, and critically; recall information; reason and learn; be open to new ideas; and to use information to enhance the quality of daily work and optimal work day functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Includes an employee’s ability to attend work consistently and to function effectively in meeting its demands. This includes efforts in and outside of work to follow and maintain good physical health by including regular exercise, proper nutrition, consistent and adequate sleep, nonabuse of alcohol and drugs, practice of safe sex, and participate in healthcare screenings and recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Includes an employee’s ability to successfully interact with others and to establish relationships that enhance the quality of work life for all people in the interaction (including self), to practice empathy and active listening, and to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the common good of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Includes an employee’s ability to establish a values system and act on the system of belief as well as to establish and carry out meaningful and constructive life’s goals. If not clear in these respects, the employee is at least attentive to their importance and is on a continual quest for clarity. It is often based on a belief in a force greater than the individual that helps one contribute to an improved quality of life of all people.</td>
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*Note.* Compiled and adapted from Corbin & Lindsey, 1994; Peterson, 1998; and Schafer, 1996

Many wellness program components include various training and development interventions. Rothwell, Sullivan, and McLean (1995), defined training as a short-term change effort intended to "equip individuals with the knowledge, organizations. The goals of both training and development are to produce and sustain change. The elements (see Table 2) of an effective wellness program are intended to produce and sustain change. So, for the purpose of this paper, skills, and attitudes they need to perform their jobs better" (p. 31). They define development as a long-term change effort intended to broaden individuals through experience and to give them new insights about themselves and their corporate wellness is defined as a system, within a workplace environment, that has goals and objectives related to assisting and enhancing an employee’s emotional, intellectual, physical, social and spiritual wellness. In
addition, this corporate system and its elements must have a direct or indirect link to increasing the knowledge and skills of an employee so that his/her job responsibilities can be more effectively in carrying out. Even though this may sound like a broad mandate, it considers only efforts within the workplace environment. Of course, wellness programs are also considered a subsystem of a larger community wellness training system (Peterson, 1998; Pronk & O'Connor, 1997).

Table 2. Examples of Wellness Programs in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication and Awareness Programs</th>
<th>Screening and Assessment Programs</th>
<th>Education and Lifestyle Programs</th>
<th>Behavior Change and Support Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDS Education</td>
<td>Blood Pressure Checks</td>
<td>Adult Enrichment</td>
<td>Anger Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness Training</td>
<td>Body Fat Assessments</td>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>Buddy Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>Breast Cancer Screening</td>
<td>Cooking Classes</td>
<td>Cafeteria/Vending Machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>Cholesterol Testing</td>
<td>CPR and First Aid</td>
<td>Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Fitness Assessments</td>
<td>Disease Specific Classes</td>
<td>Contests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>Flexibility Assessments</td>
<td>Financial Planning</td>
<td>Improved Lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively Listening</td>
<td>Health Risk Appraisals</td>
<td>Finding Balance</td>
<td>Improved Air Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback Skills</td>
<td>Hearing Screening</td>
<td>Fitness Classes</td>
<td>Incentives for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Coaching/</td>
<td>Immunizations</td>
<td>Health Fairs</td>
<td>Incentives for Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Nutritional Assessments</td>
<td>Literacy Classes</td>
<td>Include Family Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Hazards</td>
<td>Personal Wellness Profile</td>
<td>Lower Back Program</td>
<td>Individual Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping Fit on Trips</td>
<td>Posture Assessments</td>
<td>On-Site Fitness Facility</td>
<td>Managing Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowering Blood Pressure</td>
<td>Repetitive Motion Analysis</td>
<td>Organizational Skills</td>
<td>Nonsmoking Policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowering Cholesterol</td>
<td>Skin Cancer Screening</td>
<td>Osteoporosis Education</td>
<td>Other Mental Health Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Options</td>
<td>Vision Screening</td>
<td>Prenatal Education</td>
<td>Personal Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Self-Care</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recreational Activities</td>
<td>Smoking Cessation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Goals &amp; Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relaxation Classes</td>
<td>Stress Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proper Nutrition</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-help Materials</td>
<td>Substance Abuse Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seat-belt Awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sports Leagues</td>
<td>Support Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Injury Prevention</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sports-Specific Education</td>
<td>Weight Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Wellness Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>Work-Family Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking/Running Groups</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

An overall healthy organization takes an integrated view of wellness and the organization. Four elements in particular are critical: the impact of the employee's lifestyle on his or her own health; the impact of the work environment on the employee's health; the impact of employee health on the organization's profitability; and the impact of the larger environment, family, peers, leisure, on employee health and organizational profits (Cooper & Williams, 1994). Why should an organization take an interest in employee wellness? The decreased individual wellness in the U.S. population is a great concern. The Surgeon General, along with the Department of Health and Human Services, stated that 70% of all illnesses are due to lifestyle-related causes. It is thought that one-half of all medical costs are attributable to illnesses that could be prevented (Cox, 1998; Waters, 1998). In one form or another, these statistics are affecting the effectiveness of workplaces all over the country.

The Wellness Councils of America (1999) stated that some of the major reasons businesses should consider developing and offering wellness training and programs include the increasing health care costs, increasing employee stress levels, expanding work week, increasing workplace diversity, increasing technological advancements, and the finding that most illnesses can be avoided. Research has shown (e.g., Connors, 1992; Patton, Granthan, Gerson, & Getman, 1989; Stokols, Pelleiter, & Fielding, 1995) that health and fitness programs can benefit the organization in numerous financial and nonfinancial ways including reduced illness and absenteeism, lower health insurance premiums, increased productivity, improved morale, reduced turnover, increased recruitment potential, and more. Personal benefits include increased energy, increased coping skills, greater ability to manage personal lives, and improved employee interactions. Schaefer (1997) reported that the personal benefits of wellness also include "minimal frequency of illness, low illness risk, maximum energy for daily living, enjoyment of daily life, continuous development of abilities, contribution to well-being of those around you, and contribution to the common good in the larger environment" (p. 36).

An organization may argue that it is the individual's
responsibility to seek these resources outside of the work environment. Many would agree that wellness is ultimately an individual's responsibility, but research suggests that as the support systems expand, individuals may increase their readiness to undertake a wellness change effort or intervention. There is strong evidence to suggest that unless active wellness training programs are convenient, many individuals will not participate (Stokols, Pelletier, & Fielding, 1995). Many employees will participate in programs solely because they are located on-site. Pelletier (1994) stated that "individual efforts are necessary but insufficient for optimal health. We need to create approaches and systems in economics, environment, politics, and in the delivery of medical care that elicit and sustain individual strategies" (p. 17). Results of one study (Zimmerman & Connor, 1989) suggested that wellness behaviors may be positively influenced by significant others (e.g., coworkers) during the course of the change process. Peterson (1998) added that personal behavior is deeply linked to social and cultural norms. Bundura's social learning approach is one of the most familiar models of change used in the health field. In short, the theory says that change is promoted by exposure to role models. The changing of norms in the workplace may assist employees in preparing themselves for similar change. Thompson and Kinne (1990) stated that "clearly, the individual cannot be the only source of system change" (p. 48).

Issues and Challenges
There are numerous issues and challenges related to corporate wellness programs. The following section addresses them as they relate to the following elements used for investigating work systems that prepare employees to improve overall work performance: cost-benefit; stakeholders, true cost, and benefits; the strategic link; inputs, processes, and outcomes; systems change; and curriculum, instruction, and learners.

Cost-Benefit
As corporate wellness programs are often considered non-job-specific interventions, it is often difficult to tie their benefits to the financial bottom line of the organization. This is truly the greatest challenge this type of intervention confronts. Many organizational leaders, training consultants, and others believe that unless there is a cost-benefit clearly and distinctly proven, training and other interventions should not be offered. Ilgen and Pulakos (1999) explained that what is most critical to performance effectiveness in work organizations is the linking of human beings to the production process. They stated that the three key human resource processes that link people to production are staffing (i.e., linking human knowledge, skills abilities, and dispositions to the demands of the work setting), motivation (i.e., the willingness to perform job duties effectively), and employee learning (i.e., continuous learning which will ensure that employees develop and learn important skills that are required to meet changing technological or other demands in today's work environments). These are possible areas that wellness programs can use to make this link and in proposing and defending their importance and worth.

Richardson (1998) presented another perspective by explaining that there is a common belief that economic evaluation is hostile to health promotion and that the requirement for health programs to be cost effective will result in a biased allocation of funds in favor of programs that can demonstrate short-run benefits as defined by inadequate outcome measures. He warned that potential beneficial projects may be jeopardized by premature evaluation, economic or non-economic. Satisfaction and well-being may be derived directly from the characteristics of a wellness system. The limited evidence available suggests that this is a quantitatively important issue. He further claimed that "there is the potential for increasing both individual health and social welfare by systemic change and the modification of social institutions" (p. 247). He stated that:

"In principle, economics purports to measure the benefits of health programs. In practice it cannot do this. Health program outcomes are too diverse and complex for the simple measure required in economic evaluation, especially when equity is a social objective. These problems are particularly acute in the case of health promotion programs where the benefits of healthy life cannot be easily quantified. Health promotion activities are often aimed at achieving attitudinal and behavioral changes in the society at large and the benefits of these extend far into the future. Discounting in economic analysis reduces the present value of these future benefits to such an extent that important programs may appear to be poor value for money. Worst of all, the requirement that all programs should be cost effective as defined by the present tools of economic analysis will result in the distortion of programs towards those that can demonstrate short-run benefits as defined by inadequate outcome measures. In effect, economic evaluation will endorse the treatment of easily defined acute diseases at the expense of less easily defined programs aimed at the promotion of health (p. 247).

The debate on this issue and challenge continues, but what is clear is that even though some may feel that wellness programs should not need to be justified, the only way this system/subsystem will even be considered for implementation in most corporations today is if the cost-benefit to the organization as a whole is shown and demonstrated. In addition, ongoing measurement of the program's success typically is, and will continue to be, important for the continuation of such interventions. Stokols, Pelletier, & Fielding (1995) stated that by using a
wider array of measurement strategies, "future evaluations of corporate health programs will be better able to test hypothesized links between behavioral and environmental interventions at the worksite, physiologic and psychological processes, and disease or wellness outcomes" (p. 1140). These need to be broader-gauged program evaluations that "consolidate previously disparate measures of the health impacts of worksite interventions (e.g., biomedical, behavioral, and psychosocial indexes of employee health)" (p. 1140).

**Stakeholders, True Cost, Benefits**

Determining stakeholders and understanding the true costs and benefits of supporting the system are additional elements that can be used to investigate systems. After discussing cost-benefit it is clear who the primary stakeholders are (owners, workers, customers, investors, communities, and more). For a wellness program of any size to be successful, a corporation needs to provide an environment that encourages change. Connors (1992) explained that "wellness has to have the support of top management, both philosophically and financially, and the wellness program has to be integrated into the worksite" (p. 68). Previously, the importance of measuring the results of these programs was discussed. For these programs to be successful, the stakeholders' needs need to be supported and meant. Usually the organization makes the original and ongoing major investment in wellness programs. Sometimes the employees pay for classes, services, facilities, and programs. The wellness industry encourages that these wellness benefits be open to all employees and many even include opportunities for spouses, children, and significant others. The employer is usually expecting some type of job-specific benefit from offering these types of training, programs, and services. Examples of benefits include employee retention and recruitment efforts. As explained previously, many of the benefits for the organization are difficult to measure and others are nearly impossible without trained researchers/evaluators on staff. Benefits to the individuals, however, are not as difficult to measure or observe. There is vast research in many areas of wellness (e.g., exercise, nutrition, stress management, time management, and communication). After starting a wellness program, even within a matter of weeks, some individuals can begin to attest to wellness improvements and benefits. Many of these improvements can be measured. The challenge, however, is to connect the individual benefits to the organization's benefits.

**The Strategic Link**

Another element used to investigate a system is the possible or probable link(s) it may have to corporate strategies and goals. Gill (1995) argued that an organization that is working toward high performance in its employees must take a proactive role that integrates learning into all aspects of corporate life. He explained that training events (in general) and outcomes must be clearly linked to business needs (e.g., reduced illness and absenteeism, increased productivity, lower health insurance premiums, increased energy) and strategic goals. He added that training must maintain a strong customer focus and that it must be managed with a systems view of performance in the organization. Finally he explained that all training processes must be measured for continuous improvement. This, of course, is no easy challenge.

Rothwell, Sullivan, and McLean (1995) agreed that all performance improvement interventions need to have a strategic plan. This plan needs to be directly linked to the organization's mission and strategic goals. Improving the performance of employees in many ways should be included in the strategic goals and objectives of the overall organization as well. If this does not occur, the system may not become engrained into the organization. Haltom (1995) explained that most wellness training programs in the past were neither board-based nor cost-effective because they were not set up from the start to measure results, and they tended to appeal to already healthy people. In addition to those already mentioned, there are a number of other wellness areas that should be used to link wellness programs to business goals, such as managed mental health and employee assistance programs, work and life, worker's compensation and disability, corporate giving programs, compensation, safety initiatives, food service and training initiatives.

**Inputs, Processes and Outcomes**

An open system, such as the one being discussed, includes inputs, processes and outputs. The primary input in a corporate wellness program is usually the employee choosing to participate in an aspect of the program. Peterson (1997) stated that the challenge for these types of programs is to motivate voluntary participation. He suggested that one way is to provide economic incentives that reward those who improve their wellness levels. The input in this system is on an individual basis—one by one.

The primary outcome or output of this system is increased organizational effectiveness. It is expected that by providing workplace wellness training that overall employee wellness (physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual) will increase (Connors, 1992; Corbin, 1994; Wellness Councils of America, 1999). Because of this, individuals should exhibit improved ability to meet organizational demands and challenges and in turn, should improve their job performance. As individuals improve job performance, the performance of the organization should also be improved. The challenge is to make the link in the minds of organizational corporate leaders as well as to continue research in this area.

Because of the complexity and differences between programs, the specifics of the process elements in a
corporate wellness program are not fully addressed in this paper. Wellness literature (e.g., Voilker, R., 1998; Waters, 1998), however, does compare wellness systems between corporate organizations. The flexibility of such systems is actually one of the most compelling benefits. The breadth and scope of the system can range from a human resources staff member arranging to offer one outsourced stress management series to a full in-house fitness and health facility with numerous employees (e.g., director, psychologist, medical consultant, personal trainers, fitness instructors, health educators, recreation specialists, and registered dietician). To date, most corporate wellness programs have been limited rather than comprehensive in scope (Stokols et. al, 1995). However, this has begun to change especially in the past ten years. Corporate wellness programs will continue to be enhanced and increased as companies expand their efforts to reduce employee health cost through managed care, health risk appraisal, mental health counseling, and medical surveillance programs.

As a subsystem in an organization, wellness programs may be technically linked to human resources, accounting, management, internal marketing, and other line departments. However, unless it is directly linked to the organization’s mission and goals, it will remain only a support system that can be eliminated if the organization begins to financially struggle. In a motivational and recruiting role, this subsystem should be linked to all departments and individuals within the organization.

**Systems Change**

Prok and O’Connor (1997) outlined a population health improvement model that employs a systems thinking perspective. Their seven steps include: set goals, assess willingness to participate, assess health risk and health status, assess readiness to change, provide worksite interventions, evaluate, modify goals, and the cycle continues back to step one if needed. The authors note that this circular and continuous model can be used at the worksite for improving employee wellness. This model is consistent with other open system models where feedback is an essential component of the ever changing system.

Effective corporate interventions have ongoing measurements to assess employee interests, needs, attitudes, and opinions on existing as well as proposed offerings. Attendance and registrations for many services and classes can even be considered assessments in and of themselves if marketing and scheduling conflicts variables are controlled.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Learners**

Because the participants of this type of corporate programs are usually volunteers, the curriculum offered and the educators or trainers in the system are of great importance. The curriculum offered can range widely as illustrated in Table 2. In the past 15 years, behavioral modification training for stress management, time management, weight management, anger management, smoking cessation, physical fitness, personal nutrition and assertiveness have become wide-spread. Effective behavioral and lifestyle change programs are offered in a series of sessions so employees can make changes during the course of the class and receive support from the instructor and group. This curriculum is designed to help employees make changes at work and at home.

One of the challenges the wellness industry faces is the number of non-professionals teaching these types of courses (Cox, 1998). Many corporate wellness coordinators are not educated in wellness programs and issues and cannot ensure that qualified and knowledgeable instructors are hired. There are many professional certifications and degrees that show one’s credentials. Effective instructors are excellent teachers, motivators, and supporters. Choosing the right instructor can make a tremendous difference in the success or failure of wellness training. Another important element is that the learners are able to relate concepts presented into their own lives and situations. John Dewey stated (Dewey, 1915) that “learning is not the work of something ready-made called mind, but that mind itself is an organization of original capacities into activities having significance” (p. 369). In these types of training the learner must be able to immediately know how to put the information to use, have confidence in his/her skills, and feel motivated to do so. The instructor, environment, and support system play a major role in this challenge. As stated, the learners most often are not selected but make a personal choice to participate in this type of training. Some may be counseled by their personal physician to participate, while others may be encouraged by their supervisor or a human resource contact (Ganster, 1995; Halton, 1995). The ultimate decision, however, is left to the individual. The ongoing recruiting subsystem is successful through continued marketing, motivation, leadership support, and word of mouth from previous participants. Even programs presented for employees free of charge by their employer still require this recruitment. Volunteers who have higher levels of readiness for change are typically those who participate and can make permanent changes (e.g., Barrett, 1997; Hanpacher, Morgan, & Greggio, 1998). Increasing employees’ overall readiness for change may increase participants. The opposite may also be true. By increasing an employee’s wellness level, he/she may actually improve readiness for change levels. Pertinent and effective curriculum, professional and knowledgeable instructors, and motivated learners are all essential elements in the ongoing success of the corporate wellness training system.

**Wellness Program Framework**

As previously stated, one of the major struggles corporate wellness has is its tendency to operate as a separate system instead of a subsystem within the overall
organization. So, why should the wellness program be viewed as part of the overall organization? The research previously discussed does support the finding that improved employee wellness does impact the organization's bottom-line. However, until wellness programming is viewed as an essential element of a successful organization, many corporate managers and leaders will remain unconvinced of its link to their business operations. How can this problem be resolved? The GST provides a framework for answering this question. Wellness programming must be presented and viewed as a subsystem within the larger organizational system. The GST characteristics (Skyttnner, 1996) provide a framework for these systems-view suggestions:

1. The interrelationship and interdependence of the wellness program and its attributes to other subsystems and the organizational system must be clearly articulated and documented (interrelationship and interdependence).

2. The wellness program leader(s) must clearly articulate and achieve some goal or final state to be reached through systemic interaction (goal seeking).

3. The wellness program subsystem must demonstrate useful and effective inputs and outputs that directly and indirectly correspond to the inputs and outputs of the organization as a whole (transformation process).

4. Because the wellness program is part of an open system, future scenarios should be explored so that adaptability and flexibility can be designed into this subsystem (inputs and outputs).

5. The interrelated elements of the wellness subsystem must be regulated in some way so that its goals can be realized. Methods of evaluations should be designed and implemented at the beginning of a wellness program so that feedback is a requisite of effective control (regulation).

6. The hierarchical structure of a system and subsystem should always be considered. As previously addressed, systems are generally complex wholes made up of smaller subsystems (hierarchy).

7. It is important to ensure that the wellness program is clearly visualized as a specialized unit performing specialized functions in the complex organizational system (differentiation).

8. Open systems have equally valid alternative ways of obtaining the same objectives. Ensure that wellness clearly provides these alternative options when organizational leaders are looking for different methods of meeting organizational goals (equifinality and multifinality).

The GST characteristic of hierarchy also guides a resolution regarding the prescription of where the wellness system should fit into the organization. For example, the corporate wellness program is often considered a unit or part (subsystem) of a health benefits program within a company. Health benefits are found within a compensation (monetary and nonmonetary) program. Compensation is a primary unit of the human resource subsystem of most organizations. Finally, the human resource department is now considered an important and strategic subsystem within the company. This is an example of GST's hierarchical characteristic at work.

Implications and Conclusion

Managers and organizational leaders should consider wellness programming research. Research supports the notion that wellness programming can reduce costs in various ways. Following the wellness program systems framework can assist managers in designing and redesigning wellness programs so that they become integral subsystems within the organization. This framework provides guidance for long-term and sustainable program development and implementation. Wellness research is continually being conducted within the health arenas. However, less is being initiated within the business environment. It is suggested that more joint (health and business) research be conducted in the areas of the effectiveness of workplace wellness. Research should focus on the effectiveness of specific interventions (see Table 2) and their relationship to business results. Finally, future research should explore the systems view in relationship to wellness programming. This research should provide sound suggestions related to the design of stable, long-term, and successful corporate programs.

Wellness program systems have been shown by many to be effective for individuals and organizations. Wellness programs are not only considered systems but are also an integral subsystem within an organization. A wellness program systems framework is suggested to assist wellness leaders in designing integral long-term wellness programs.

Wellness programs in the workplace continue to increase every year. Connors (1992) claimed that "studies have consistently shown that healthy people make healthy companies. Healthy companies are more likely to make healthy profits and to have healthy returns on their investments" (p. 68). This may be simplistic, but the logic is worthy of consideration. If this system is implemented and effectively managed in an organization, the formal and informal results will demonstrate performance improvements in individual employees as well as with the organization as a whole.

References


