



Oswald Wellness Playbook

The Diversity Divide in Wellness Programming

Appreciating and Leveraging Cultural
Competency to Engage All Employees

Cultural competency is especially necessary in organizations with a diversified workforce and will assist in successfully implementing wellness programs and maximizing employee participation and engagement.

Introduction

Our country is founded on diversity. Within the United States Declaration of Independence, certain inalienable rights are guaranteed to all men, of them, Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Diversity defines us as Americans and, in effect, defines each organization. The term culture refers to the values, norms and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave and make judgments about the world.¹ Culture plays an important role in why one group of people may actively participate in company-sponsored wellness programs and another group may not.

Cultural competency refers to awareness of one's own cultural identity, as well as awareness of one's views about cultural differences.⁸ Cultural competency also includes how a person interprets and reacts to such differences based on their own cultural identity. Cultural competency is often demonstrated through an individual's ability to learn about cultural and community norms. Cultural competency is especially necessary in organizations with a diversified workforce and will assist in successfully implementing wellness programs and maximizing employee participation and engagement.

The information presented within this playbook will outline how organizations can identify diversity that exists within the employee population. Once the groundwork for identifying diversity has been established, guidance will also be provided on ways to increase employee engagement in wellness programs.

THE GAP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND EMPLOYEES



The Office of Minority Health, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, cites the importance of recognizing and addressing cultural differences that exist within health care. By recognizing cultural differences, such as those that exist among health beliefs, practices, cultural needs and linguistic needs, a wellness program can be better tailored to meet the needs of a diverse population and ultimately produce positive health outcomes.¹

One example of recognizing and responding to a linguistic difference is by acknowledging Spanish-speaking employees and providing wellness information that has been translated into Spanish. Catering to linguistic differences will send a strong message to employees that the employer is respecting unique cultural needs. As a result, employees will better understand wellness communications, which will assist in empowering them to take charge of their health.



Wellness in Action

An employee, whose native language is Spanish, previously visited a physician for an annual check-up. The employee left the appointment feeling frustrated and confused because the physician only spoke English and, therefore was unable to effectively communicate with the employee. The employee finds out that completing an annual preventive visit is part of the company-sponsored wellness program.

Impact

The employee is now hesitant to participate in the wellness program for fear that they will feel confused and frustrated again.

Solution

It is important to recognize that languages spoken fluently by employees will influence their understanding of a wellness program. If an organization has Spanish-speaking employees, they will need to approach wellness differently, especially as it relates to communication and available resources. Organizations should work to minimize miscommunication by translating written materials into the appropriate language(s) or consider hiring a bilingual employee to facilitate the communication of important information.

SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL BEHAVIOR AND HEALTH

Research has shown how environments are shaped by social processes that influence health. Therefore, the socioeconomic environment of the employees should be identified during wellness program strategizing. The Social Ecological Model (SEM) below (Figure 1), depicts how an individual's outside influences can affect behaviors. Each of the categories identified in the SEM (individual, interpersonal, institutions and organizations, community, structures and systems) will determine if an employee will

participate in a wellness program. As organizations are thinking about communicating and strategizing a wellness program, they should review and utilize the SEM. To utilize this model, organizations should think of their employees as the individual and then fill out the diverse influences in the rest of the model that are unique to their workplace. Once established, an organization can then put together a communication and strategy focused on maximizing participation and understanding of the wellness program.

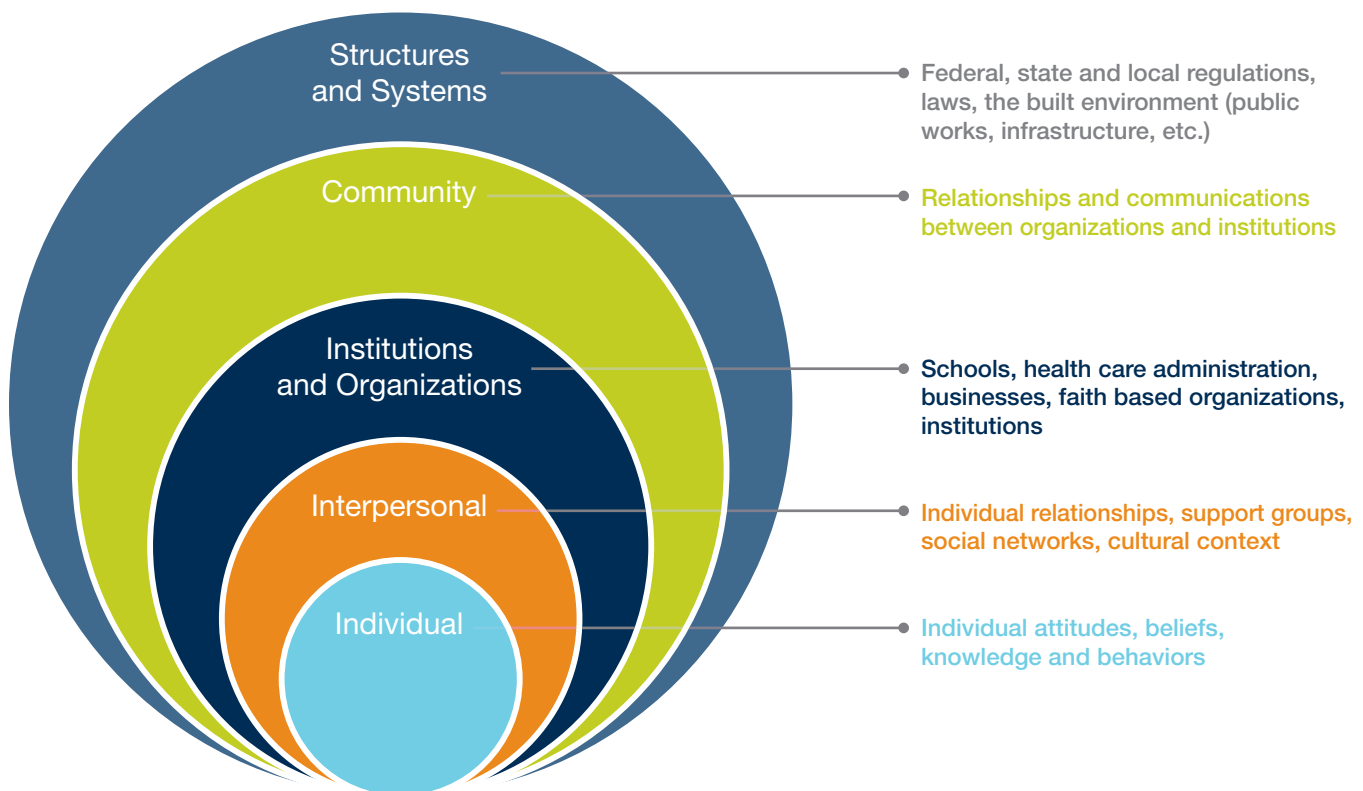


Figure 1
Social Ecological Model (SEM) depicting health behaviors of an individual as it relates to outside influences³

DIVERSE LITERACY RATES



As organizations become increasingly more diverse, employers will need to begin to address health literacy disparities. Often materials are not written at the appropriate literacy level of the readers. The U.S. Department of Education, conducted an assessment of adult literacy in 2012.¹¹ The results revealed that 18% of individuals tested were at either basic or below basic levels of proficiency.¹¹ Most health-related material is written at the tenth grade reading level or higher. However, the average reading level

in the United States is equivalent to an eighth grade level.¹² Other studies have shown that 20% of adults reportedly read at the fifth grade level or below.¹³ In light of these findings, wellness programs should be written at a level that makes the information easily understood by all employees. By doing so, employee participation in wellness programs will increase and ultimately, employees will be better educated about the program, as well as their health.¹⁴

In order to make educated decisions, it is critical that employees understand the expectations of a wellness program.

Tips for accommodating to various literacy rates include:

- Utilization of graphics
- Easily understandable word choices
- Avoidance of medical and health jargon

CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN ACTION

The Diversity Training University International (DTUI), a leader in the field of diversity certification and training, specializes in training, instructional design, organizational development and methodology of cultural competency components. DTUI isolated four components that are utilized to measure cultural competency: Awareness, Attitude, Knowledge and Skills (Figure 2).

Figure 2
The flow of effective action¹⁸





Awareness

Awareness is consciousness of one's personal reactions to people who are different than themselves.⁸ From an employer standpoint, awareness encompasses recognizing different types of people within an organization.

In order to become conscious of how the organization embraces diversity, senior leaders and wellness program leaders must first identify their personal awareness level. To assist senior leaders in doing so, they should respond honestly to the following questions:

One

Where does diversity exist within the organization?

Two

Does the organization's wellness program promote diversity?

Three

Is there a possibility that the wellness program could upset or exclude any employees, especially as it relates to diverse needs?

Four

If the program has the potential to upset/exclude employees, are there alternative ways to achieve the desired results of the wellness program without this negative impact?



Attitude

Attitude refers to the values and beliefs towards diverse populations.⁸ Today more employers are shifting from being culturally unaware to having an open-minded attitude that is cognizant of cultural differences and, therefore, respects diversity.¹⁶ As an organization, senior leaders should work towards supporting wellness programs that are sensitive to the cultural differences of their employees. Once employers are mindful, they should be accept and embrace differences that exist between themselves and employees in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and beliefs and concentrate on providing an environment that promotes employee participation in wellness programming. The employers must first understand their employees and their needs.

Knowledge

Knowledge is understanding one's own views on different values and beliefs.⁸ As it relates to employers, knowledge includes understanding the backgrounds and beliefs of the employees, then integrating these difference into the wellness program. The more knowledge an organization has about different cultures and backgrounds, the less likely they are to distress a group of employees.¹⁷ Also, knowledge of how culture impacts problem solving, managing people and the likelihood of posing questions, will keep senior leaders connected with their employees.¹⁷ Successful communication of a wellness program relies on this connection. As an organization, understanding the employees' values and beliefs will affect not only how the message is delivered, but also how the message is received. Employers that have specific knowledge about their own racial and cultural heritage affects the decisions made in their organization about their wellness program.¹⁶ Being knowledgeable about appropriate communication techniques that will resonate among a diverse employee population, will increase the success of a wellness program.¹⁶

Wellness in Action

Horizons Incorporated, a manufacturing company with nearly 150 employees based in Cleveland, Ohio, was faced with low engagement in their wellness program. Bette Beltakis, Human Resources Administrator at Horizons Incorporated, and her team created an open forum to encourage communication between senior leaders and employees and to better understand why employees do or do not participate in the wellness program. Horizons Incorporated hosted an employee event in which they prepared meals for the employees and had individual conversations with the employees to learn more about their specific needs and concerns. Expressed concerns ranged from those that were personal to those that were centered on business. “We have always had great support from our senior leaders. The health of our employees and their families is important to Horizons Incorporated.”⁹



Skills

The final component, skills, refers to applying cultural competency as it relates to taking action and practicing perfection.⁸ As senior leaders begin to develop or strategize wellness programs, they must monitor their personal thoughts and actions to ensure they align with the message that is being communicated. “Taking action” will be made apparent as employers begin to develop wellness strategies that highlight diversity and accommodate differences among the employee population. Upon deploying a wellness strategy, high participation rates will be more likely if employers are listening to the feedback, needs and requests of their workforce. Strategic design of a wellness program involves receiving input from many departments within the organization. The creation of a safe environment where employees feel free to express their needs or concerns, especially those relating to cultural differences, will yield higher participation in a wellness program. Achieving a safe and supportive environment can be attained through acknowledging and addressing diversity.

Wellness in Action

Floral Plant Growers, a company with almost 175 employees based out of Wisconsin, has a large population of Spanish speaking employees. Therefore, the organization works to accommodate this diversity with a targeted communication strategy, specific programming and all-encompassing initiatives. The diversity within the employee population at Floral Plant Growers was identified mainly due to the amount of questions that stemmed from companywide meetings. More specifically, Spanish speaking employees were not fully understanding materials that were being delivered about the wellness program. To gain a better understanding of the unique needs of the employees, Sandy Klein, Director of Human Resources, and her team utilized methods such as employee surveys to obtain a better understanding of the specific needs of the employees. As a result of the survey responses, Floral Plant Growers provided wellness program materials and communications in Spanish. Additionally, during Open Enrollment, program details were communicated in Spanish during one-on-one meetings with a Spanish translator. Klein states, “We recognize and value diversity within our organization. We add a personalized touch by making an effort to personally speak with each of the employees regularly on initiatives taking place within our organization”. She goes on to say, “And diversity means more than just translating our communications into Spanish, it’s being able to connect with our employees and help them understand and be engaged.”⁶

CONCLUSION



The ability of an organization to recognize diversity is essential to the success of a wellness program. As organizations continue to promote wellness as a conduit to increasing employee health and morale, designing a program tailored to a unique population is becoming increasingly important. The Social Ecological Model (Figure 1) describes why some employees may participate in wellness programs and why others may not. A variety of influences affect each employee and their view on participation in a wellness program. Focused communications that keep in mind the literacy level and linguistic needs of the employees, can reduce misunderstanding and misinterpretation, which will lead to increased participation.



Cultural competency, a concept that is continuing to expand in all facets of business, is recognized as a pivotal part of encouraging employees to take action. Awareness, Attitude, Knowledge and Skills (Figure 2) are important components of cultural competency when making decisions about wellness programs and communication. This is significant because as organizations adopt cultural competency, employees will feel more connected to the organization, understand the mission of the wellness program and will support its efforts.

Wellness programs will continue to grow and thrive within organizations in an effort to create happier and healthier employees. As an organization begins to develop a wellness program, cultural competency must be kept in the forefront. Cultural competency is not a concept that can be applied sporadically, but must be present throughout the organization.

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osWell

HEALTH MANAGEMENT

osWell Health Management integrates with clients' current benefits strategy, and provides a team of wellness professionals, to implement and launch corporate wellness initiatives. The goal is to reduce risk, cost, worry and work for clients, making their businesses better with the right health management resources to drive results.

The program offers consulting services, worksite health support and an online resource center, featuring, a Wellness e-Library, monthly newsletters, best practice guidelines and downloadable marketing materials. Through the online resource center clients also have access to osWell University, which serves as a portal for employers to educate themselves on health related topics and offer webinars to their employees. Learn more at www.oswaldcompanies.com/oswell or call the osWell Health Management Hotline at **877.746.0026**.

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