

Fit for Organizational Change? Applying Curiosity to Wellness at Work

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

“When we are curious, we view tough situations more creatively and have less defensive reactions to stress.”

—Francesca Gino, *Harvard Business Review*

EVERY YEAR AT OUR CPHR BC & YUKON CONFERENCE IN Vancouver, we see an array of new and seasoned health and wellness programs being offered to the HR and business community. While innovative programs might create breakthroughs and attract more employee participation, the questions remain. What does it really take to raise the bar on wellness programs? What makes them thrive? What makes a difference?

Let’s be curious, explore and identify some internal and external factors leading to sustainable, better health and wellness for the workplace as a whole.

Technology Facilitating Wellness

As we know, productivity tends to shift upwards when employees have increased levels of energy and stamina from reaching and sustaining their fitness goals. Moreover, with increasing technology applied to the wellness spectrum, it is easier to provide effective programs and tools with which employees can keep track of their fitness goals and progress towards them.

Yet, while technology facilitates the process of engaging such goals, it does not necessarily engage team spirit on its own. Finding ways to use technology while stimulating a collective élan optimizes its use while supporting a cultural shift towards health and fitness.

For example, one client company encouraged its team members

to purchase a Fitbit. As they used it consistently over at least eight weeks and reached their initial goals, they were refunded for that purchase. By that point, employees were truly involved: challenging and supporting each other’s goals and setting up contests across teams with winners emerging with gift cards.

Buy-in from Leadership is Crucial

In conversation with Meaghan Jansen, owner and corporate wellness specialist at Employee Wellness Solutions Network, she shared that one way to boost the effectiveness of wellness programs is to create momentum with a campaign, including posters, a mini-health fair and various appealing tools. Jansen explains how her company is “all about prevention and proactivity,” affirming the importance of “getting the conversation going while raising awareness on risks of preventable health issues.”

Moreover, Jansen points out that her programs often produce an ROI of three to one and generate better levels of energy and morale among employees—while reducing turnover. Not surprisingly, she has observed that the programs with the highest levels of engagement, including onsite health coaches, produce the bigger changes. To reach impressive results takes time though; when it comes to health and

wellness, there is no “quick fix.” Instead, a strong program eventually helps instil employees with new habits and produces change in the workplace culture whereby they encourage each other to reach or sustain their goals.

This is where the concept of ROI meets VOC (value-on-caring) head on—albeit with support from more than the HR team alone. Jansen affirms that these programs “fail or succeed largely

“Curiosity encourages empathy as employees listen to each other.”

depending on the level of buy-in from managers and leaders.” Leading by example, again at all levels, is very important here. As people, regardless of title, participate and encourage others, a positive ripple effect spreads throughout the organization.

Big Value on Small Budgets

When budgets are limited, there are still numerous ways to create excellent and effective health and wellness programs. For example, the City of Vancouver has been a pioneer with their health-promoting programs—and health enhancement co-ordinator Kate Lekas has been the main driver of this department for over 25 years. In conversation, she proudly mentions that their Fit City program, which started on a shoestring budget, won a 2016 Gold Award from Wellness Fits, a program created by the Canadian Cancer Society and the BC Government.

Describing parts of their wellness program, Lekas explains that employees can earn points for health-supporting behaviours and activities. This includes all forms of exercise—dancing, yoga, walking, gym, etc.—and, with sustainable living in mind, also includes points that can be earned for composting or car pooling.

Lekas emphasizes that a big part of their program’s success lies in the fact that there is something for everyone and their specific strengths, needs and limitations. When points add up to certain amounts, prizes can be earned such as caps, water bottles and sport socks—all carrying the City logo and sported with pride by employees. With the use of metrics, they have also determined that the most active program participants not only have fewer sick days, but are more productive, engaged and loyal to their employer.

Acknowledging that mental health issues are becoming more prevalent—with chronic stress, depression and anxiety among the more common issues—the City’s wellness efforts also include the promotion of resilience and stress management strategies and tools.

Drawing on Curiosity Supports Wellness

Consider the recent report from Morneau Shepell on HR trends and the preoccupations of HR professionals; it reveals that mental health and chronic stress are among leading concerns. Looking deeper into prevention on the intrinsic side, curiosity is currently standing out as the elemental human attribute that can help surpass these challenges to the benefit of organizations and individuals alike.

In “The Business Case for Curiosity,” an October 2018 article in *Harvard Business Review* by Harvard professor Francesca Gino, she explains how curiosity strengthens and improves engagement and collaboration—while often reducing stress as well. According to Gino’s research, curiosity is also linked to a greater level of agility and enthusiasm in helping the company perform and succeed.

However, Gino points to two typical barriers to embracing curiosity in business: a resistance to questioning the status quo and seeking to bypass exploration in favour of efficiency. Referring to high-profile companies in the Silicon Valley, she suggests that when the culture actually values curiosity, HR professionals are more likely to hire with that attribute in mind. In turn, when leaders model inquisitiveness and emphasize the importance of learning goals, the barriers fade out as the benefits of curiosity rise in people’s awareness.

Gino’s research also found that curiosity encourages empathy


as employees listen to each other, allowing them to better communicate and collaborate. Resultantly, applying curiosity to health and wellness programs can only foster increased participation, innovation and overall organizational potential.

Self-compassion as Workplace Inner Resource

On the flip side, while interpersonal communications are key to wellness, so too are the conversations we have with ourselves. Finding self-compassion and acceptance in this “intrapersonal” dimension is also rapidly gaining recognition as an antidote to the stresses with which we all contend.

In her article, “Give Yourself a Break: The Power of Self-Compassion,” Serena Chen, professor at University of California, Berkeley, demonstrates that when faced with setbacks—such as being overlooked for a promotion or an interpersonal conflict—employees typically become defensive and blame others, or berate themselves. Both reactions aggravate stress, set up negative self-talk and prevent employees from learning from what happened. Unfortunately, we tend to be our own worst critics.

Citing several formal studies, Chen concludes that those who respond to setbacks, failed attempts or conflicts with self-compassion are more likely to arrive at a realistic self-appraisal, which is the foundation for self-improvement. Rather than falling into complacency or defeatism, this view of self fosters the ability to summon the grit needed to enhance personal/professional skills and change physical/mental wellness-related habits. In short, self-compassion sets the foundation for a growth mindset.

Now, as greater numbers of people embrace wellness, self-compassion and curiosity, it is within your wheelhouse as HR professionals to drive further out-of-the-box wellness programs—firm in the knowledge that you are allowing multiple success stories to thrive. 

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions.

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