

Staff sent on programme of self-discovery

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Programmes that improve an executive's emotional, spiritual, social and intellectual well-being enhance productivity.

If you've been struggling to increase productivity, enhance work-place culture, and reduce absenteeism, while recruiting and retaining top talent, chances are your organisation needs a complete physical.

At least that's the view of sport psychologist Craig Lewis, founder of corporate wellness programme, Team Spirit. Lewis claims most employees will struggle in the performance-stakes until they're more in touch with what they're really striving to accomplish.

Based on Lewis' experience, poor productivity is typically linked to a dysfunctional internal culture. And he's convinced the best way to get the culture in order is to develop people in a way they want to be developed. Based on his assumption that a lot of stresses within the workplace go unnoticed, he says improved internal culture will deliver greater productivity.

"Simple things like showing staff how they add value to the organisation helps to add meaning to their jobs," says Lewis.

While Lewis believes personal staff development will enhance any organisation's productivity, sadly, too few people know how to self-improve. That's why it's often up to employers to take the initiative by leading staff in a voyage of self-rediscovery.

He dares employers to ask staff what they're passionate about, what really lifts their spirits, and when they last engaged in these activities. According to Lewis, the difficulty most people have answering these questions suggests they're not doing enough of the things that are critical to them as people.

Like it or not, he says corporate life makes it difficult for many people to sustain the same balance of work and play.

"Most people on the corporate treadmill never stop to reflect on the path they're on and where it's taking them," Lewis says.

As a result, executives often struggle with their self-esteem despite their apparent achievements in a business sense. "The physical image they were once able to identify themselves through is no longer a cause for celebration," says Lewis.

"The issue of restoration doesn't just lie in promoting a more physical being. In order for this to happen, you need to first commence with a foundation of habit and process."

While one-off group motivational sessions are useful, their effectiveness rarely lasts more than a few hours or days at best. Lewis says simply offering staff a quick massage every day is equally pointless if they haven't been taught how to balance work and pleasure.

He also warns employers that a "one size fits all" approach could seriously backfire if they expect a group "pep-talk" to relieve stress or fix more serious issues confronting individuals.

"A group approach to corporate wellness is fundamentally flawed. It overlooks personal dimensions and doesn't unearth what motivates individuals," advises Lewis.

From his perspective, the entire health and safety mantra has been sold the wrong way to Kiwi firms. Instead of taking a "tick the box" approach, organisations should look at getting a tangible pay-back from their corporate wellness initiatives. "New Zealand firms are too bogged down with trying to meet OSH requirements. If all they're trying to do is meet minimum standards then all they'll get is a minimum outcome."

Lewis says what's really needed is individually tailored programmes designed to reinforce desirable staff behaviour both in and outside work. He claims that all behaviour is capable of being modified as long as there's consistent intervention. That comes in the way a comprehensive wellness programme cover all aspects of an employee's life. He says if employers continue to reaffirm the importance of personal development, their staff will ultimately end up being what they've talked about becoming.

"Most people are disillusioned with the corporate culture. That's why these programmes need to be consistent and structured enough to reinforce desirable behaviour over time," says Lewis.

So exactly how does an individual wellness programme work? In Lewis' case, Team Spirit evolved out of a pilot programme he created for QBE Insurance late last year.

Over an initial 15-session programme, the insurer's senior management team received counselling on the emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual aspects of their lives.

After a medical assessment, each participant on the programme was given a physical conditioning (exercise) regime, including advice on improving their eating/drinking habits. Underpinning these activities were goal-setting programmes encompassing all aspects of an executive's life.

"The idea is that if we can get senior management to have a good understanding of work/life balance it will ultimately filter down to other staff."

Lewis witnessed an initial wariness by QBE's senior management to provide such intimate details. But he says once they recognised the programme was not an audit,

and that the information gained remained confidential only to them, they embraced it.

So what net affect did this wellness programme have on the QBE senior executive team? In addition to losing weight, many executives admitted to being mentally and physically fitter, and having improved their overall lifestyle. Lewis is adamant that willingness to rethink their leadership style was directly attributable to their efforts refocusing on personal development.

He says it was important they kept up the physical dimensions of the programme while working on other aspects of their lives.

The bottom line, says Lewis, is QBE management team started to understand each other better. Even an informal environment like gym meant they started sharing a commonality beyond their work.

What QBE Insurance finally realised, says Jan Aitken the insurer's HR manager, was that if they gave individuals and each department the opportunity to contribute to goal-setting, they'd be more likely to achieve desired outcomes.

She says a better definition of the goals within roles has also highlighted the contribution individuals make within the organisation. It also gives clients a better insight into who QBE staff are.

"It's through empowering staff to share in developing and achieving goals that any business is most likely to grow."

While many companies agree that staff wellness programmes are a good idea, Lewis suspects too few really bother to identify what the outcomes should be. And because they don't, he says they're never really sure of what they've achieved.

"So at the very beginning of any wellness programme identify what you want to accomplish. Underscoring this there should be recognition that organisations with positive cultures usually have good staff retention," says Lewis.

"Productivity is enhanced when everybody really feels good about turning up for work."