Implementing Employee Wellness Programming ... The Right “Weigh”

BY JANIE OWENS, RD, LDN

The Dining Services team at East Carolina University has grown the employee wellness program, and it has begun to make a difference in the lives of many employees over the past year and a half.

The program began in January 2013 with a group of 10 managers participating in a weight-loss competition. In 90 days, the group lost nearly 283 pounds, and by the end of 180 days, the total pounds lost reached over 320. The challenge was so successful, a slightly revised program was rolled out to all employees on campus in the fall of 2013.

More than 100 employees registered to participate, and by the end of the 90-day challenge, another 578 pounds had been shed from our campus dining team. A third program was rolled out this past spring, and with another 100-plus employees participating, 312 more pounds were lost from our teams. That is over 1,200 pounds lost from our campus dining team.

How did our program motivate our employees to change what they were eating, start moving more and start making healthier lifestyle choices? Three basic components were used:

1) Accountability.
2) The power of knowledge with reliable resources.
3) A friendly competition among peers.

Accountability is important to the success of a wellness program. It helps to keep participants on track and headed in the right direction. It provides an opportunity to validate hard work, as well as identifies areas that need improvement. Participants were held accountable each week with a weekly weigh in. After being weighed, weekly results were recorded and then posted as a percent of body weight lost for the week for others to see. A large chart was posted in each specific dining location that identified the top three winners (or losers depending on how you want to look at it).

A person must also have the right tools and information to lead a healthy lifestyle. With all of the health and wellness information available, it can be challenging to make sense of what is reliable and accurate advice to follow. In order to help our employees sort out fact from fiction, the participants were given weekly handouts on a variety of topics, such as eating more whole grains or smart snacking. Some weeks also included personal challenges, such as drinking more water, eating more meatless meals or more fruits and vegetables. All of these handouts were found from reliable and free websites or were created utilizing evidence-based nutrition and wellness information.

The last and probably most motivating factor that contributed to the success of our employee wellness program was the friendly competition and support between peers. Setting and working toward goals and overcoming day-to-day challenges is always easier when doing so with a support group. Our employee wellness program automatically created this culture, and was crucial in creating such positive results for our program.

In addition to weighing participants, a partnership was developed with Student Health to provide blood pressure screenings for our employees. A blood pressure reading was taken at the beginning of the spring 2014 program and again at the end of the program. The hope was to show a correlation to our employees that weight loss can provide other positive results to their health, and that there are other important numbers you need to know regarding health.

Our blood pressure screenings did exactly what we hoped for, and identified several employees with a positive correlation between weight loss and improvements in blood pressure. The screenings also identified employees who needed to follow up with their physician due to readings that were classified as pre-hypertension or Stage 1 and Stage 2 hypertension.

As the nutrition director of ECU Campus Dining Services and coordinator of this program, it has been rewarding to watch something as simple as weighing people and checking blood pressure make a difference to the health of so many people’s lives. I have observed first hand how a program like this can and does make a difference to the overall well-being of a person. There really is nothing more satisfying than that. My hope is that our experiences and success will motivate others to implement similar programs on their campuses. It will not only change your employees’ lives, but all of those involved as well.

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