10 MUST-READS FOR WELL-BEING PRACTITIONERS: 2019 EDITION

WHY PEOPLE NEED BIG WELL-BEING GOALS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

GET READY FOR 15 MINUTES OF FAME
Does Wellness Engagement Really Matter?

No. And yes.

For years well-being practitioners have pursued their vocation as if wellness program participation and engagement were the most important workplace considerations in the lives of those they serve. It’s not... by a long shot. At the top of the list are things like challenging, meaningful work, contributing to something bigger than themselves, and appropriate recognition/compensation. And when it comes to benefits, your program may not even crack the top 10, depending on the individual and their life/career stage.

The realization that wellness programs aren’t highly valued across the board, combined with the inherent difficulty of improving population health behaviors, has given rise to a splinter industry. It often leads with “workplace wellness doesn’t work,” then proceeds to lay out the model that does. That framework typically varies depending on the vendor and what the recurring revenue stream looks like at the end of a consulting gig.

But the either/or argument misses the point. Workplace wellness doesn’t work when people hate their jobs, boss, or organization. We can’t throw someone into a toxic situation and fix it with 2-minute timeout stretching...
routines and healthy choices in vending machines. When employees do feel good about their jobs, however, wellness programs can work... and very well at that.

An examination of Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For 2018 demonstrates that great workplaces often include robust wellness offerings. Similarly, organizations receiving recognition within the wellness industry are filled with employees who say it’s a great place to work, in part, because the employer supports overall health and well-being. Purveyors of traditional wellness services take the credit, while those who claim wellness doesn’t work suggest enhanced well-being is a byproduct of better alignment.

SHOW ME THE DATA

The wellness industry became its own worst enemy more than 2 decades ago when it pursued the holy grail of return on investment (and more recently, value on investment). A program or vendor would run their risk, participation, and behavior data through an academic formula producing a lot of gobbledygook that magically resulted in 3:1 ROI. Unfortunately, even mild scrutiny of the measurement and analysis methodology punches big holes in the conclusion.

The irony is that most of the C-suite doesn’t care about wellness program ROI. Yes, they care a great deal about the organization’s healthcare expense and getting it under control. But they’re savvy business people who can look at 3:1 and know instantly it’s a made-up number. To maintain credibility within your company, don’t try or buy for ROI (rhyme unintended).

They also do care whether they’re able to hire and retain the best employees. And they do care if workers are engaged and productive. So the best leaders in a thriving organization ultimately care a lot about worker health, happiness, and a population that finds meaning and purpose in their work. Why? Not because they’re necessarily great humanitarians. The smartest leaders care because they know that these conditions contribute to profits and success (psycnet.apa.org/buy/2002-12397-006), particularly over the long term.

WHAT TO DO AND NOT DO

If you’re in a situation where people generally dislike where they work and you’re not in a position to change that, start looking for another job. But if the climate is neutral to positive, you have a great opportunity to make a difference in individual lives as well as influence the culture more broadly:

• Do set program objectives that aim for personal well-being and contribute to a positive company culture.
• Don’t set risk reduction or cost savings goals over which you have little or no control.
• Do measure your progress toward well-being and culture goals over time and adjust based on what your population is telling you.
• Don’t set it and forget it.
• Do ask employees what they want and are ready to act on. Then deliver it.
• Don’t make wellness participation mandatory to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Only voluntary participation can lead to long-term results.

• Do create opportunities for team, department, and buddy participation wherever it makes sense.
• Don’t overemphasize competition. While some thrive on it, others are turned off. The social aspects of wellness programs should be designed to support without pressure to achieve.
• Do emphasize health and quality of life in the near term and on a personal level.
• Don’t focus on risk reduction — employees have more significant issues today than something that might happen in 20 years.
• Do keep offering ways for people to enhance physical health — it will always be a top priority for many.
• Don’t try to be all things to all people. Whatever well-being programs you offer, make sure they’re top shelf.
• Do work to embed well-being across functions and leverage the talents and tools of departments, teams, unions, and individual workers.
• Don’t make your wellness program an island with specialized staff given sole responsibility for your goals.
• Do market your program like it’s a mission-critical service line; it is.
• Don’t assume people will find your programs and services on their own; they won’t.
• Do get out and talk to people around the organization; set the expectation that your staff will, too.
• Don’t expect to run a successful wellness program from your desk.
So many great books, so little time. We recommend moving these titles to the top of your stack:

1. **Adversaries into Allies: Master the Art of Ultimate Influence** (2013) — Bob Burg mixes expert advice on people skills with tips to enhance and apply emotional intelligence in this practical handbook for mastering persuasive communication.


4. **Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World** (2018) — Cal Newport teaches tactics for improving concentration when you need it most... on tasks and projects requiring deep thinking.

5. **Forks Over Knives: Flavor! Delicious Whole-Food Plant-Based Recipes to Cook Every Day** (2018) — Scientific evidence continues to uncover the benefits of plant-based eating for health and quality of life; try it out for yourself with Darshana Thacker’s latest culinary collection.
6. **Moon USA National Parks: The Complete Guide to All 59 Parks** (2018) — Get a jump on your next adventure or National Parks-themed well-being event. Becky Lomax makes planning easy and fun with her beautiful new travel guide, full of handy lists to help you make the most of your time and energy.

7. **Take Us to a Better Place: Stories of Health, Hope, and Healing** (2019) — What could the future of health look like? The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation asked fiction and futurist writers to respond to this question; the result is a collection of short stories that promises to be as entertaining as it is thought-provoking: blog.tedmed.com/a-culture-of-health-captured-in-fiction.

8. **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma** (2015) — The lasting effects of childhood trauma affect adult well-being in significant ways. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk explains the consequences as well as innovative treatments that help people heal.


If none of these titles tickles your fancy, visit HESonline.com and search “must-read” for previous lists of our favorites. Happy reading!

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**FIRST ANNUAL CHILLY TOES & RUNNY NOSE WALKING STREAK CHALLENGE!**

To keep minds fresh and energized we encourage employees to take a 15-minute walk break twice a day at HES. But it’s cold (and honestly, miserable) in our headquarters city, Midland MI from about mid-November to the end of March. So this year we asked team members Emily and Hannah to create a walking campaign that would keep our employees on track. Here’s what they came up with…

- **Name:** Chilly Toes & Runny Nose Walking Streak Challenge! (CTRNWSC, because we like acronyms.) The URL is still available, so go grab it if you want it.
- **Goal:** Walk outside at least once a day, every day December 3-February 15 (57 work days).
- **Tracking:** Old-fashioned posterboard available in the break room with emoji stickers for solo walks and buddy walks (highly encouraged).
- **Trivia:** On all things walking and outdoorsy health benefits. Anyone who logs at least once a week is eligible for a random prize drawing (assuming they get the answer right).
- **Prizes:** Gift cards to local (within walking distance) merchants like coffee shops and shoe store.
- **Bonus:** Walk once a day for all 57 days and be eligible for something wonderful (random drawing).
- **Slack® Channel:** #chillytoeschallenge for updates and encouragement.

We’re tracking what we learn throughout the campaign and will share it in a future issue of the *Practitioner.* In the meantime, if you’ve a cold weather physical activity programming success you’d like to share with our readers, send it to editor@hesonline.com.
WHY PEOPLE NEED BIG WELL-BEING GOALS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Wellness practitioners have for years supported setting and achieving small goals as the path to long-term health improvement. Here’s the thinking: If the goal is easier it will seem more reachable, and accomplishment results in momentum, creating a virtuous cycle that ends in wellness nirvana. And while there is some evidence that incremental health behavior change contributes to self-efficacy, plenty of practical experience shows small improvements are so close to previous habits that it’s easier to slip back into less healthy routines.

So is taking the stairs instead of the elevator enough to lead to a more active, healthy lifestyle? Rarely, if ever. But that doesn’t mean encouraging stairs over elevators isn’t a good thing. It is, particularly when wrapped in a fun promotion that reinforces your wellness program’s brand. But for the individual that’s not enough to have real meaning. And in the absence of meaning, the twice daily hike to the third floor produces little satisfaction to go along with the elevated heart rate. And without satisfaction, the behavior ends when the promotion ends or becomes stale.

Humans are driven by a desire to seek satisfaction. Big goals work because:

1. They begin with the expectation of a higher degree of difficulty than small or status quo goals
2. Greater difficulty imparts higher significance
3. Higher significance enhances meaning
4. Achievement of meaningful goals results in satisfaction.

WHAT MAKES A GOAL BIG? TOO BIG?

That depends on the person and the context. But in general, any goal that causes the participant’s eyes to widen and makes them wonder Can I do this? is a big enough challenge. If their immediate reaction to a stated goal is Sure, no problem or worse, I’m already doing that, it’s not significant enough and won’t result in satisfaction; therefore, no long-term behavior change.

Conversely, if their eyes bug out, heart starts racing, palms sweating, and they say I don’t think I can do it, the bar’s too high and is a recipe for frustration at best. When in doubt, err on the side of too big than too little — people will surprise you, and more important, themselves.
ANY PLACE FOR LITTLE GOALS?

Yes, but don’t call them goals, call them milestones. And don’t celebrate a milestone as if it’s a goal. Consider this example:

Pat sets a goal to lose 20 pounds* and keep it off (a big goal for anyone 20 or more pounds overweight). At the end of week 1, Pat is down 3 pounds. What’s the correct reaction from you?

A. Way to go, Pat. I knew you could do it! See how a few changes in your eating patterns and activity can make a big difference? Keep at it, buddy!

B. Good start. Any questions for me?

At the end of week 5, Pat is down 10 pounds. What’s the correct reaction from you?

A. Whoa! You’re kickin’ butt, Pat. You’re half way there, now all you need to do is keep it up. I knew you could do it — so proud of you!

B. Good progress, Pat. Any questions for me?

At the end of week 8, Pat is stuck at 10 pounds down. What’s the correct reaction from you?

A. No worries, buddy. You’ve done great so far and should feel good about your accomplishment. When you’re ready you can get back to hitting it hard — let me know if I can help.

B. Looks like you’re stuck at 10 pounds lost, Pat. Any questions for me?

16 weeks from the start, Pat reports he’s down 20 pounds. What’s the correct reaction from you?

If you’ve answered A to weeks 1, 5, and 8 you won’t be getting a positive report from Pat 16 weeks into it — or ever — because you’ve sabotaged his chances of success in part by celebrating milestones as goal achievements. He set a big, meaningful goal. But before he had a chance to get there, you acted as if he already had.

The A responses are a health promoter’s natural inclination. We think we’re being supportive, encouraging, when in reality we’re sucking the determination out of participants by reducing the significance of what they set out for part way toward achieving it.

The B responses on the other hand acknowledge progress or lack thereof, showing you’re paying attention. They don’t give the impression that a goal has been reached or the job is done. It respects the participant’s responsibility to continue toward what they set out to do and offers assistance if needed or wanted.

B responses also recognize something every successful wellness practitioner comes to understand: Health is a personal responsibility. You can facilitate change with a supportive environment, helpful tools, smart messaging, and timely guidance, but in the end it’s up to Pat to achieve his goals. You can’t cheer him on to success any more than you can bribe him with incentives or threaten him with punishment to get the desired outcome.

*This is a fictionalized account for simplicity. Any weight loss goal would be geared toward behaviors to achieve it, not solely pounds lost.

ARE YOU PARTICIPANT-FOCUSED?

A good way to test whether you’re concentrating on participants is to ask: Would I take advantage of the services I offer? Answer these questions, then judge for yourself:

- Are you interested in participants’ needs and problems?
- Do you listen intently when they talk to you?
- Do you follow through on promises quickly?
- Do you start listing the features and benefits of your services before you find out if that’s really what they want?
- Do you believe in what you’re offering?
- Are participants happy to hear from you?
- Do you focus on building participant relationships or just try to fix their problem?
- Would you recommend outside or competing services if they’re a better match to participant needs?

If you manage well-being staff or contractors, also use these questions as a checklist for performance reviews and coaching sessions.
SMP: THE EPITOME OF SMALL-EMPLOYER WELLNESS

Every now and then a small employer comes along that shows how well-being, done right, makes a meaningful difference in the lives of employees and in the organization — on par with, or even surpassing, the lavish programs of corporate giants.

SMP, an IT service and solution provider based in Rochester NY, exemplifies how a small employer can execute a robust well-being strategy that goes beyond the culture of health holy grail. Currently employing just over 100, SMP’s hiring of a dedicated wellness director, Nikki Reynolds, as 48th employee is a testament to the company’s vision and commitment.

The wellness program is guided by 4 goals — to:

- Make personal health and self-care prominent factors in the lives of employees
- Offer a variety of services that promote total well-being and encourage broad participation
- Foster a widespread sense of creativity, focus, and vitality
- Increase collaboration and camaraderie.

Wellness activities include 5-6 weekly fitness classes, taught by Nikki, an accomplished triathlete as well as a nutrition educator who also leads cooking classes and lunch ‘n learns. Recently she has welcomed outside experts to present on diverse topics such as the opioid epidemic, financial well-being, and the effect of poverty on less fortunate local community members’ self-sufficiency.

A typical week might also include a project in SMP’s 3 raised garden beds. “The garden and related activities,” Nikki points out, “promote a

BY BOB MERBERG
Workforce Well-Being Consultant

SPOTLIGHT

Nikki Reynolds demonstrates “super easy” preparation of healthy soup.
connection with the environment and provide employees with time in green space.”

A 20-minute guided imagery relaxation is offered twice a week, therapeutic massage is available monthly, and employees recently participated in a challenge called Better Zzs for a Better Me to focus on healthy sleep.

“We provide a variety of activities,” Nikki notes. “I say to all employees, ‘Do the things you want to do. If things don’t interest you, don’t feel pressured.’ The goal is for wellness to be synonymous with working at SMP.”

**INSPIRATION TO TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

There’s seemingly no end to Nikki’s innovations, such as:

- **Scrumptious Squash** day, when she roasted a variety of less common winter squash so employees could experience alternatives to acorn and butternut

- **For Garlic Sakes, Eat the Scapes**, to turn garlic lovers on to scapes as a novel option

- **Super Easy Soup**, where she prepared a soup in advance and explained the process cooking-show style, while employees feasted on the end product.

“Hopefully,” she explains, “participants relieve stress, they’re more rejuvenated when they return to their desks, and they’re inspired to try something different when they go home.”

Not all the creative ideas start with Nikki. An employee proposed SMP’s ongoing Curious Crumb Club, an informal group that meets every 2 weeks to explore any

health-related issue. “I research the topic and present the content and we just chit-chat. We’ve done everything from a nut butter taste test and discussing the health benefits to our most recent topic, endocrine disruptors (chemicals that interfere with hormonal systems).”

In addition to Nikki’s classes, SMP has offered several creative individual and team programs that draw participation rates approaching 50%:

- **Fall into Step Challenge**: Participants tracked distance walked during the autumn months

- **The SMP Great Migration**: Teams accumulated mileage to travel virtually from Rochester to Savannah GA (a destination Nikki selected “on a whim”)

- **SMP Well-Being Olympics**: During last year’s Winter Games, teams engaged in friendly competition with cardiovascular exercise, produce servings, mindfulness, sleep, social well-being, strength training, and avoiding tobacco.

Nikki forgoes common wellness program staples — like biometric screenings and HRAs — in favor of wider home-brewed offerings for an employee population she describes as “highly skilled, driven professionals in a really fun environment.”

**CELEBRATING SUCCESS**

The company elects not to use an incentive system, but they do offer prizes to keep things interesting and enjoyable. “Participants might get a $25 token for the farmers’ market or a gift card for a sporting goods store.” She’s even cooked employees a healthy breakfast as a prize.

“Nobody is going to enroll in an 8-week program because they may have breakfast made for them on a Thursday morning,” she acknowledges. “The intention is to celebrate success, not to motivate behavior.”

Some businesses SMP’s size may bemoan the impediments to sustaining a wellness program for a small employee population. But Nikki notes the advantages. “Being small allows me to be better tuned in to the company’s needs. It also allows employees to know me better and be more comfortable stopping in to my office for a 1-on-1 health coaching session or to sign up for a program. The value of personal interaction is huge. And it allows our whimsical programs to be more readily accepted.”

(continued on next page)
GRATITUDE AND GIVING

Community service is a hallmark of the SMP wellness program. Employees are encouraged to give back in numerous ways and to take stock of their own good fortune:

• Around the holidays, Nikki set up a program so people can volunteer to buy gifts for families in need. She also organized employees on a Friday afternoon for Cards and Cocktails to write thank-you notes in holiday care packages for service men and women deployed overseas.

• Employees participate in frequent service opportunities at the local food pantry and Ronald McDonald House (a residence for families of children hospitalized nearby).

• Throughout last November, Nikki offered Thanks and Giving: “Each Monday I sent employees an email with weekly objectives. They got an assignment, such as reading an article or watching a TEDTalk® on gratitude or community service. Then we had an optional meeting on Thursday. And during the month I arranged for various voluntary community service opportunities.”

Long term, Nikki remains flexible about SMP wellness goals to assure the program continues to meet employees’ changing needs and interests. An annual survey goes only so far in predicting those needs and interests, especially as the company’s population continues to grow. The next steps reveal themselves when she asks the right questions. “For me,” she says, “it’s always pushing forward to ‘How do I do a better job and deliver a better program? How does SMP continue to be a great place to work?’”

SHAPING THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

SMP founder and President/CEO Eric Rorapaugh (see photo) doesn’t participate in every event, but his endorsement of wellness is known to all employees. “He is at a lot of sponsored events in the community, he’s at award events, and he uses it as a talking point, too,” adds Nikki. “Even when he sees someone in the hallway heading out for a run, he asks, ‘Hey, going for a run... that’s awesome,’ rather than ‘Why aren’t you at your desk?’”

Employees are aware that Eric walks the talk, actively engaging in a variety of races and adventure events. His commitment is evident to visitors by his sleek 2-person and 4-person racing canoes mounted on the wall of the company gym.

Nikki describes the company’s unique, inspiring wellness perspective: “Rather than trying to have the wellness program fit into our company culture, the program has helped define our culture. It helps to shape the work environment for our employees and is consistently part of our messaging to the community.”

MEANT TO BE AT SMP

The story of Nikki’s path to SMP is a tale of destiny. Her commitment to fitness, rooted in sports and outdoor activities as a kid, morphed into a more holistic outlook — ranging from nutrition to emotional and spiritual well-being. She eventually earned a Bachelor’s in Health Promotion and a Master’s in Health Promotion Management from American University.

After participating in a local triathlon, Nikki grew curious about the event’s corporate sponsor; she had never heard of SMP. She emailed Eric Rorapaugh to thank him for sponsoring the race — then introduced herself and made a pitch for how wellness could benefit his company. “A few weeks later,” Nikki recalls, “he contacted me to schedule an interview. I shared my vision for a comprehensive wellness program at SMP, and he said, ‘Let’s go for it.’”

Eric set the tone for the program by sending a note to all employees announcing Nikki’s arrival and explaining what a valuable opportunity the wellness program would be for everyone.
When asked about everyday obstacles to well-being, people consistently rank healthy eating at or near the top of the list. And they’re telling the truth… only 1 in 10 US adults eats enough fruit and vegetables, according to the CDC (cdc.gov/media/releases/2017/p1116-fruit-vegetable-consumption.html).

Every well-being program you launch is an opportunity to dispel nutrition myths and make healthy food choices easier for participants. Whether the focus of your campaign is physical activity, sleep, or other areas, offer nutrition tools and resources with real-world tips to help people get comfortable and confident about making healthier choices.

Easy-to-fix, mouthwatering recipes, meal-prep and cooking tips, and practical guidance for eating habits create advice participants can trust along with support for experimenting. When they make the connection between healthy eating and feeling better, they’ll tell everyone they know… providing social proof for your well-being services and inspiring others to sign up.

“By using the suggestions for snacks and meals given during this challenge, I’ve developed healthier eating habits. I also have more energy to do more activities with my kids. This challenge was my favorite one so far!”

— Spring Into Motion participant

Inspired Messages are actual participant comments from an HES wellness campaign.
Artist Andy Warhol in 1968 predicted that everyone will eventually have 15 minutes of fame. Combine the rapid growth of podcasts, blogs, e-newsletters, and streaming video — in addition to old-school media like newspapers and TV — with escalating interest, and the prediction has never been truer for wellness professionals.

Are you ready for your 15 minutes? Here are examples for getting into the public eye:

- A wellness podcaster wants to interview you about your organization’s program
- A local newspaper runs a story about a wellness award you won and asks you to provide details
- A national media outlet is running an article about wellness incentive regulations and calls to get a quote from an employer your size
- You’ll be presenting at a professional conference, and the sponsor wants to preview your message in its preconference promotion

**USE KEY MESSAGES**

I was once fortunate enough to receive media training from my employer’s PR consultant and have continued to develop my skills. For example, later in my career, while working as wellness manager at an insurance company called Apex, our hometown newspaper interviewed me by phone. My colleague, Ellen, an Apex PR manager, arranged the interview and stipulated that she sit in on the call — our standard procedure. The reporter asked typical questions about the wellness program’s history, participation rates, and impact on healthcare costs. Afterward, Ellen met with me to debrief.

“You did a great job,” she told me, making me proud of my media savvy. “But...” (Uh-oh!) “You rambled a little. Next time, have 2 or 3 key messages planned before the interview, and no matter what you’re asked, try to angle your answers toward those messages.”

It was a valuable lesson. We communicate more calmly and effectively when we’ve crafted and memorized primary messages. And for us to be accepted as essential to our organizations, those messages should align with the employer’s mission and values.

Thereafter, one of my main messages was “Apex is a leader in employee wellness because we cherish our employees and always aspire to be an even greater place to work.” As a response to a question about ROI, for example, this message more...
effectively served Apex and our wellness strategy, compared to my knee-jerk response about the pitfalls of measuring ROI.

**REINFORCE COMPANY AND PRODUCT NAMES**

On another occasion, at a charity walk, the sponsoring nonprofit had a videographer capturing sound bites from team captains, like me, who had entered large numbers of employees. Again, my involvement was coordinated by Ellen, who stood in the wings during the interview and kept me relaxed beforehand, calmly offering suggestions when I panicked about what to do with my hands on camera. (“Clasp them naturally in front of you or keep them by your side,” she advised.)

The videographer showed up and after some formalities said, “Ready to start?”

“Well, we’re committed to the importance of —”

“Stop!” he said, gruffly.

He looked at Ellen, then at me, and said, “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Apex,” I said.

“Then you need to say that. I don’t think Apex will appreciate you not mentioning their name.”

Eventually, Ellen authorized me to face the media alone, but I always appreciated her presence. She offered moral support, managed logistics so I could focus on the messages, checked my appearance before videotaping, responded to unexpected non-wellness questions — like those about company finances or leadership — and took meticulous notes so we had our own record.

If you have a PR professional’s help, embrace it as the most important logistical step to external promotion. Also learn and respect the boundaries of what’s acceptable in your organization; many employers restrict the contact employees are allowed to have with media.

**TIPS FOR BETTER MEDIA COMMUNICATION**

When you do interact with the media for information or promotion purposes (and not in response to a crisis like a data breach or participant lawsuit, definitely topics you need to refer to your PR or legal department), these tips will help:

- Scout the media outlet — whether a newspaper, blog, podcast, or trade publication — and confirm it’s suitable for your organization
- Rehearse your key messages
- Secure a private, quiet space for recorded interviews (even air conditioners and other noises you usually don’t notice can be distracting on a recording)
- Use a landline with handset, if possible, for phone interviews
- Relax, and remind yourself that you’re in charge of the interview
- Sit up straight if you’re videotaped while seated
- Prepare notes and have them available for reference during phone interviews
- Don’t say anything “off the record” to a reporter
- Assume any camera or microphone in your presence is recording, even before and after interviews
- Decline politely if you’re not comfortable answering a question
- Don’t say or imply anything negative about your or any other organization or person
- Confirm for the reporter your name, your employer’s name, and the spelling of both.

Remember to pay close attention to major media interviews, noting how guests present themselves as well as what is and isn’t effective on talk shows, news broadcasts, radio interviews, and podcasts. Watching the same guest on multiple shows, like an author or actor on a publicity tour or politician on the campaign trail, will reinforce your understanding of how key messages can skillfully be woven into interview responses.

Just as I went through media training and afterward learned from Ellen — and to this day continue to learn from experience — you’ll grow more proficient with each opportunity and soon be eager to star in your own 15 minutes of fame.
UNJUSTIFIED COMPLAINTS

ROCK THE BOAT

Overcompensating may swamp it

Regular Practitioner readers know we’re big on evaluation — both process and impact. Several groups we’ve worked with recently have taken our message to heart, and make a point of getting feedback on every program or service they offer.

But some have misinterpreted our suggestion by regarding any criticism as a need to immediately rectify the situation to the critic’s satisfaction. Not necessarily so. Criticisms often are misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, or just plain unwarranted venting. Instead of clarifying the issue, some wellness pros — in the unending desire to please — rush to fix “the problem” and end up overcorrecting. The result can be a lowering of standards or lessening of service when doing nothing may have been a better option. Some cautions:

• Grumpy old men. Some folks just don’t like anything new or different. If you remove the negative tone from their complaint, you can evaluate it on merit and respond appropriately.

• N = 1. If your monthly program update email goes to hundreds or thousands of employees and you get a single complaint, you probably don’t need to make a change.

• Gotcha. Some people are just hoping you’ll screw up so they can nail you. If they’re not offering constructive suggestions for improvement, just let it slide.

• If at first you don’t succeed... I’d like to watch you do it over. Like gotcha, some people feel important if they can get you to go to a lot of trouble to fix a tiny flaw that makes no difference.

Strive to learn from every mistake. But know when you’ve done enough and steer the boat in a straight line rather than diverting too much energy to inconsequential course corrections.
The journey to when Neil Armstrong stepped foot on the moon started when President John F. Kennedy declared the goal in 1961 — years before. With a little commitment and planning, you too can achieve giant leaps:

✦ Define clear goals and completion point. Commit to concrete, specific objectives, then set a challenging but reasonable timeline for reaching them. If you want to prepare more meals at home, decide how often and by when.

✦ Set large-scale goals. Backtrack from the ultimate point of victory to an initial action — figure out what you need to do this week to start. If you want to get a master’s degree, begin by completing the application for admission. If you want to run a marathon in a year, find out where you need to be in 3 months and how to prepare.

✦ Celebrate your progress. Every time you check off a milestone, reward yourself — a dinner out for a month of eating home-cooked meals or new socks for walking to work twice a week.

Follow these steps to chart a path toward your own first — whether it’s a mission to eat more vegetables, be active, get better sleep, or whatever helps you feel the best version of yourself:

1. Write down your top 6 goals plus the incremental steps to achieving them.

2. Add a deadline for each major goal... try to have at least 1 expire every 3 months, so you stay motivated and feel a sense of accomplishment.

3. Email your list to people who will support you and those who will be on the lookout for ways to help you achieve them.

4. Print out a copy and keep it where you’ll see it often (refrigerator, wallet, bedside stand), keeping you focused on what’s most important.

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