

Helping Employees BECOME Wellness CEO


By Carol Scott, M.D.

Melissa enjoyed her job. She was particularly proud of her achievements in her industry — she was one of just a handful of successful women. Melissa was a skilled leader and mentor to men and women in the organization. She also was proud of her family: Her husband of 13 years, and her daughter Sarah, who was just entering fifth grade. Then things changed radically — her company was acquired by a fierce competitor. She was no longer assured of her position in the company. At the same time, her mother was diagnosed with colon cancer and her husband decided they had “grown apart.”

It was not until a coincidental minor car crash forced her brief visit to the emergency room that she was diagnosed with dangerously high blood pressure. During the exam, she acknowledged that she had not seen a primary care physician in more than four years. “I didn’t have time to go to the doctor,” she said. She was not intoxicated, but her toxicology screen detected alcohol in her bloodstream. “I just had my usual after-dinner glass of wine to wind down.” This incident was Melissa’s wake up call.

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ To maintain health and wellness, employees must take personal accountability for adopting healthy lifestyles, understanding their personal health needs and making appropriate health-care benefit choices.
- ⇒ Health problems caused by stress annually costs employers nearly \$2 billion through poor performance on the job, workplace injuries, absenteeism and tardiness.
- ⇒ When the benefits department and/or work-life unit incorporates an understanding of individual employee health-related beliefs, values and stressors, the direct and indirect costs of health (acute and chronic) will decline, and employee satisfaction and productivity will soar.



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The Stress Factor

Unfortunately, employees such as Melissa are becoming more prevalent in the workplace. Stress at work, stress at home, no routine medical care, family crises — these events lead up to a ticking time bomb in terms of both physical health and employee benefits.

While it is impossible to eliminate stress completely, employees need to find ways to manage it. By understanding and managing stress, workers can achieve good health and work-life effectiveness. The responsibility of management and human resources is to educate employees on the signs of stress and to give them tools and tips to manage stress.

To maintain health and wellness, employees must take personal accountability for adopting healthy lifestyles, understanding their personal health needs and making appropriate health-care benefit choices. They must become wellness CEOs.

Stress in the Workplace

Because more than 50 percent of adults report high stress daily, it is likely that stress takes an enormous toll at every workplace. Health problems caused by stress annually costs employers nearly \$2 billion through poor performance on the job, workplace injuries, absenteeism and tardiness. Experts estimate that 70 percent to 80 percent of primary care doctor visits are due to stress.

A recently published study examined the relationships between health risks and individual medical expenditures. Specifically, the impact of 10 modifiable health risk behaviors was examined in an analysis through the Multi-Employer Health Risk and Cost database (HERO). Researchers studied almost 50,000 male and female employees from six large companies. Results indicated that employees at high risk for poor health outcomes and significantly higher results in seven out of 10 risk categories were those who reported themselves as

“depressed” or experiencing “high stress.” These employees also had higher results than employees with high blood glucose levels, those at an extremely high or low body weight, former or current tobacco users, those with high blood pressure or those with sedentary lifestyles. Results showed that the effects of stress can be more physically detrimental than many other more readily identifiable “at risk” behaviors or lifestyle choices.

The Role of Human Resources and Work-Life in Stress Management

Supportive and healthy corporate cultures help reduce employee distress and burnout, while improving productivity and satisfaction. HR and work-life professionals need to make workers feel that they really are the company’s most important assets. Understanding employees means understanding that stress is a norm in most of their lives. Stress reduction is a central premise of

work-life effectiveness. Stress reduction cannot just mean providing secondary and tertiary forms of care. Benchmark organizations will proactively develop stress relief programs as an integral part of employee health and wellness.

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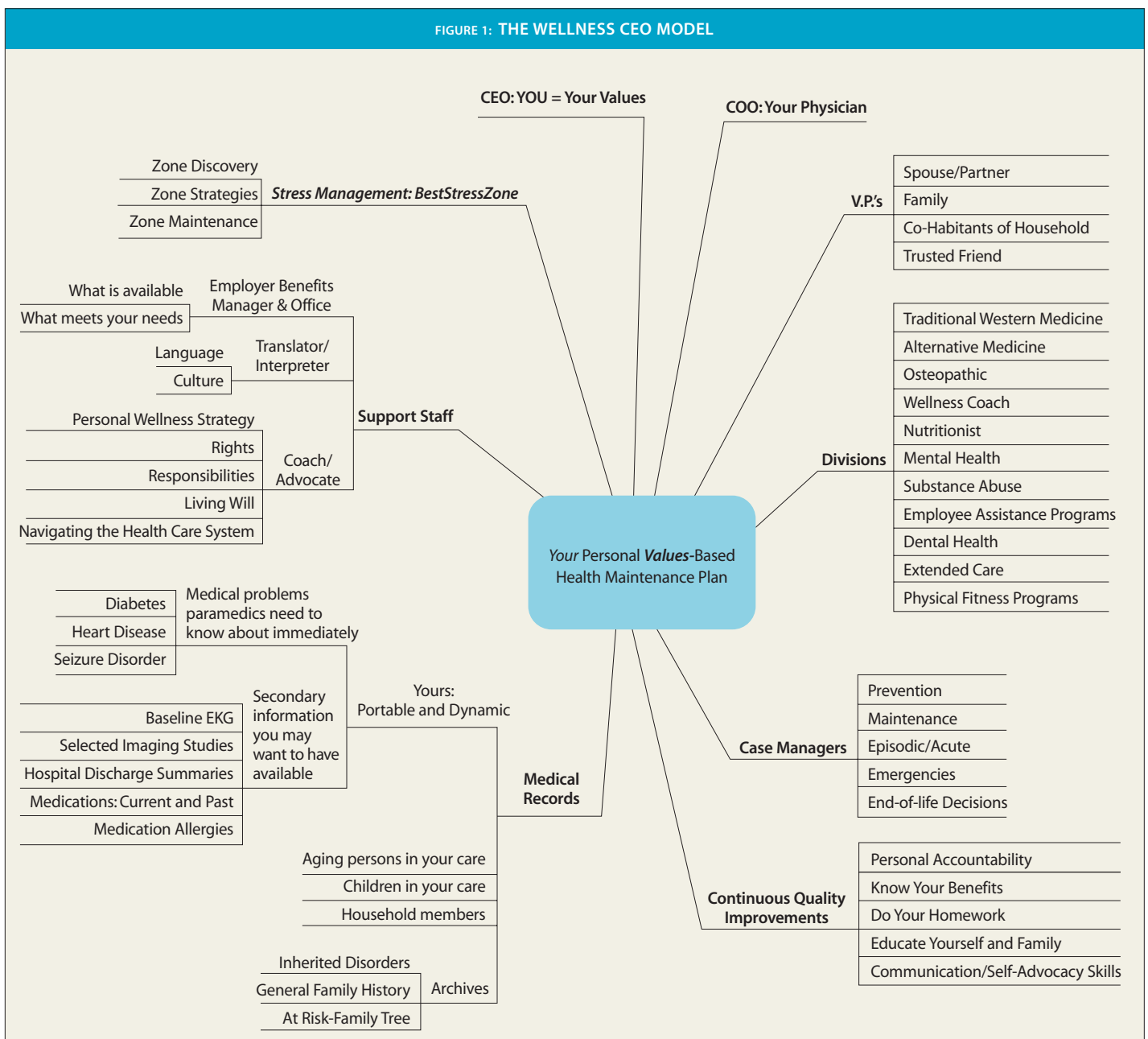
At the same time, workers need to learn to recognize when they are stressed, as well as use traditional approaches to managing stress. While stress is inevitable, being “stressed out” is not.

The Value of Developing Employee Wellness CEOs

Being healthy and well is more than the absence of disease, disability or stress. It is achieving and maintaining psychological and social well-being as well as physical health. Being healthy

allows one to have the capacity to seek and achieve a sense of balance.

Employees can never have the personal empowerment or job effectiveness needed for optimal happiness and success without making health and wellness a priority. Each employee needs a personal health and wellness management plan, just as companies have business plans. In this scenario, HR professionals need to teach employees how to become their own wellness CEOs. (See Figure 1.)



Stress

Stress: The Impact on Employee Wellness

According to the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Worker Health Chart 2004, workers with anxiety, stress and neurotic disorders experience a much greater work loss than those with all other nonfatal injuries or illnesses and "healthy" employees — 25 days away from work compared with an average six days for a healthy employee. Employee-related pharmacy costs for depression and anxiety are up by 30 percent in the last five years.

Stress is a process, a state of arousal that occurs when the demands of the environment tax employees' adaptive capacity. Having exposure to a stressor is not the same as being vulnerable to it. Stress responses can be emotional, mental, behavioral and biological. Biological responses to stress are survival mechanisms that cause us to run to safety, stand firm, fight or just concentrate on the task. This internal "emergency response system" triggers an instantaneous burst of energy, power to our muscles, pain resistance, sharpening of our thinking or resistance to bleeding, pain and infection. The same defensive mechanisms that are good and healthy stress responses also help motivate and engage employees. There are times when stress is good.

However, when an employee's system is constantly triggered/stimulated or overloaded, it responds in the same way as a computer that has too many programs turned on at one time — it crashes. While chronic stressors such as caring for an aging parent, being in a difficult marriage or facing the deadline for a big project are common, employees need to know when these stressors can lead to a state of "distress." And employers need to educate employees on these signs.

In a state of distress, the quality of health, performance, productivity and decision-making are likely to deteriorate. Stress also increases interpersonal conflicts and breakdowns in communications, and predates a tendency toward accidents. Chronic stress weakens and damages the body and accelerates the disease processes. Common scenarios include cardiovascular problems, such as hardening of the arteries and hypertension that can cause heart attacks and strokes; increased susceptibility to colds and infections; and increased allergic responses leading to asthma and autoimmune disorders. Finally, the mind itself can be damaged when normal, reversible feelings of stress lead to memory loss, anxiety or clinical depression. When these reactions occur, employers should no longer expect an employee to be a productive member of the workforce.

The Strategy

- **Optimizing the full potential and assets of all people is vital for a healthy corporate culture.** Instead of employees selecting and using their health care benefits in response to perceptions of their state of illness or wellness, employees should determine their real health and wellness, as it relates to values and stressors. Before illness strikes, employees should consider how being healthy looks and feels. Health is having physical, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being. Maintaining health requires making appropriate lifestyle choices and is likely to require therapeutic lifestyle changes. Employees need to be aware that change may be necessary.
- **"Valuelinking" describes the process of employees creating a personal wellness vision for which they can assume ultimate responsibility.** Employees should define and list personal values in terms of wellness/health. Values that contribute to their definition of "quality care," such as long- and short-term priorities, passion and purpose, are uncovered and explored through the completion of a customized organization-specific self-assessment. The self-assessment

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should include specific organizational benefits such as tax-exempt health savings accounts (HSAs) or incentive wellness options. Identification of these values will be a driver for new program development that the organization may want to implement to assist employees in their endeavors.

- **Employees need new knowledge and skills for the empowerment to control their health and the impact of stress in their lives.** Employees can develop a better functional knowledge of health care systems and the tools they can use to optimally navigate within the system. Specifically employees need:
 - To more effectively use self-care resources designed to improve health decision-making and manage chronic diseases
 - To access medical translation and interpreter services
 - To improve their health literacy (needed for all levels of nonhealth trained employees)
 - To understand their genetic predisposition and prepare for positive lifestyle modification to control those areas which are amenable to modification
 - To maximize controllable stressful elements in their work environment.


Such skills allow employees to obtain meaningful clinical information and apply self-advocacy skills in the doctor's office on the phone with the nurse advice line or at the bedside of one's aging parents. These skills also teach them how to translate a personal wellness vision into company health-care benefit choices.

- **Employees are the true leaders.** The physician is merely the person who operationalizes the vision — the chief operations officer. Vice presidents are the people that employees must consider in developing a wellness plan (family, children, household members).

The End Result

Companies that choose to take on the responsibility of helping employees develop the skills necessary to take charge of their health will reap the rewards. By analyzing their health values, accessing routine medical care and learning to manage stress, employees will be more resilient, energized, healthy and productive.

Melissa had developed heart disease and other conditions due to the biologic response to stress. After realizing the impact that stress had on her health, Melissa sought out ways to manage her

stress and take charge of her health. She now seeks routine medical care and has made an effort to develop a healthy lifestyle. She is on the road to optimal health. 

Author's Note: The term Wellness CEO is service marked to The Corporate Doctor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Scott is a physician, wellness strategist and stress relief expert. She is on the faculty of the George Washington University School of Medicine and the University Of Maryland School Of Medicine. She can be reached at cscott@thecorporatedoctor.com or 410/653-0750.

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