Team Wellness Challenges
Energizing Engagement, Inspiring Change
As 21st century businesses strive for lean operations and profitability, the appeal of work teams has never been higher. A well established method for driving efficiency and innovation, teamwork pays off in productivity as well as promoting worker cooperation, camaraderie, and commitment.

Likewise, the team wellness challenge is a powerful catalyst for health behavior change — by boosting participation and engagement. Few can resist the appeal of teaming up to test their mettle against coworkers — across the hall or across the country — for better fitness, nutrition, or weight loss. Striving to reach common wellness goals creates a supportive environment where employees are more likely to succeed at adopting a healthier lifestyle.1,2
Teams Increase Wellness Motivation, Participation, and Results – Without Financial Incentives

When done well, team-based wellness competitions and buddy features are naturally fun and social, infusing the hard work of behavior change with a sense of enjoyment and play. The shared experience of working together toward a challenging goal strengthens relationships, bolsters accountability, and gives each member a tremendous amount of support.

Business, social, and health research suggests a team-based approach offers great potential for enhancing wellness program effectiveness:

• **The power of a positive influence.** Simply observing others working toward a goal can motivate people to pursue the same goal, whether or not they realize it. This effect is most potent when people share a group. The typical workplace is full of groups — departments, units, functions, as well as physical work areas — giving team-based wellness initiatives a familiar format.

• **All together now.** By aiming for similar wellness goals — such as being more active or eating more produce — wellness team members reinforce the behaviors in each other. Because team success requires individual success, members become mutually accountable for staying on track.

• **Contributing to something larger.** There’s a reason community volunteering and sports teams are so widespread. People enjoy working alongside others with similar interests to reach a target — and feel they’re contributing to something bigger than themselves. It happens in the workplace, too. Studies show that employees are more likely to make a positive contribution to the organization if they’re part of a team and feel their work plays a role in group performance. In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Katzenbach and Smith describe it this way: “The deepest, most satisfying source of enjoyment comes from having been part of something larger than myself.”

• **A sense of belonging.** In addition to autonomy and competence, a strong kindred feeling is a key element of intrinsic motivation, whether for work performance or wellness behaviors. Team membership cultivates group identification and cohesiveness — and keeps the goals in focus. As team relationships are strengthened, members are more likely to learn from each other, also raising effectiveness.

• **Better wellness engagement and outcomes.** A statewide team-based program resulted in weight loss (0.8–1.2 BMI units), with obesity falling from 39% to 31% by the end of the study. In reviewing the literature on weight loss competitions, researchers concluded that team competition was more effective than individual competition in improving both participation and weight loss outcomes.

• **Built-in social support.** A 10-month weight loss study found recruiting people along with 3 friends in a strong social support intervention decreased the number of dropouts — and pushed up the percentage of those maintaining weight loss over 6 months — compared to those recruited alone. Team members also had a 33% greater weight loss at 10 months than those recruited alone.

• **Enhanced confidence, cooperation, and security.** Teams are less threatened by change than individuals tackling it alone. Their commitment to a common goal energizes and inspires each member to do the difficult work of achieving lasting behavior change.

• **Team pride inspires action.** When the Electric Eels see Terry’s Trekkers pulling ahead in the standings, they’ll double down to maintain position. Pride and group accountability are strong motivators — employees who would never start a walking program on their own find a way to get it done when teammates are counting on them. The praise received for sticking with it reinforces resolve.
Teams Help Drive a Workplace Culture of Health

Social norms and networks exert intense influence on health behaviors — for better or worse. Team-based wellness programs tap into this and help establish more positive social norms for physical activity, nutrition choices, and other health behaviors.

- **Resetting workplace cultural norms.** A study of over 3600 women suggests social norms are good predictors of physical activity and eating behaviors, independent from social support. Researchers speculate those who observed others practicing healthy habits may have seen these behaviors as socially desirable and in turn adopted them.

- **Strength in numbers.** When a group of coworkers strives for the same wellness goals, the healthy behaviors required to reach those goals are reinforced. A study of social networks found individuals are more likely to adopt new health habits when surrounded by dense clusters of social connections — people they already know, living or working nearby. These connections offer the support needed to make complex changes — like adjusting lifestyles to make exercise a daily habit, eat more produce, or get enough sleep. The same research also suggests that healthy changes will spread more rapidly through grouped social networks compared to random networks. This underscores the idea of encouraging workers to form their own wellness teams rather than assigning them.

- **Enhanced problem solving.** When individuals run into difficulties, the team can help. Working together improves problem solving and decision making for individuals — by at least 20% for many. It’s effective for healthier lifestyles as well as for workplace productivity.

- **Loyalty.** Wellness teams may even boost commitment to the organization. In a study of production employees, those with positive perceptions of their work teams were significantly more committed to the employer than those with negative or neutral perceptions.

- **Personal perks.** For reasons that aren’t completely understood, team motivation can have positive impact on personal motivation and well-being. Personal accountability could be a big factor — it’s easy to put off making healthy changes if no one else is paying attention. In addition, supporting others in a team effort offers employees the side benefit of becoming more aware of — and accountable for — their own behavior, inspiring them to become role models and intentionally set a good example. The desire to help others achieve their goals could result in a greater likelihood of personal success. The more they focus on coworkers’ success, the more personally successful each team member can become. Helping others has also been linked with increased positive emotion, better health, and reduced mortality.
Employees Love Team Competitions

When it comes to workplace wellness, nothing beats a friendly competition for making participation fun; enjoyment is a huge factor in keeping employees on board and enthusiastic. Team-based wellness participation fosters a sense of camaraderie and spirit that inspires members to achieve behavioral goals — for the sake of team pride as well as a personal sense of accomplishment.

But not just any wellness campaign will appeal to employees and drive lasting behavior change. Effective team-based programs for a healthier, more productive workforce — and reduced healthcare costs — include the following fundamentals:

• **Fun.** With captivating themes, good-natured competition, and light-hearted activities, effective wellness campaigns are fun — without being silly. If they’re not fun, why would anyone participate — even with the shallow promise of a financial reward? (Which, by the way, we don’t recommend — read our white paper, *How Financial Incentives/Disincentives Undermine Wellness.*) We never outgrow a need for play — and fun wellness programs help meet that need.

• **Social connections.** Wellness campaigns that facilitate social connections make positive results more likely — for individuals and populations. Design elements — such as interactive walls for user status updates or the ability to share online trails — should make it easy for participants to make contact and cheer each other on.

• **Challenging goals.** The best programs offer goals that inspire participants to aim high. In contrast to the concept of taking small steps toward wellness, evidence points to the value of striving for larger goals. With a difficult-but-possible objective, the brain can more easily detect a discrepancy between current and desired behavior and create a level of discomfort that helps motivate you; with baby steps, not so much.22

When coworkers participate in a team challenge to lose weight, walk daily, or eat more produce, they get to know each other better; they share resources and wisdom to spur team progress. They also learn how to hold each other accountable, provide encouragement, and give or receive support when the going gets tough. These are the skills needed for success in the workplace too — fostering the kind of productive, positive environment where people and businesses thrive.

The enhanced communication and camaraderie last long after the wellness campaign is over. That’s a big win, whether you need effective teamwork on the factory floor, in the c-suite, or somewhere in between.
An effective team component can boost wellness program participation and completion rates by 50% or more. Here are the keys to getting it right every time.

1. **Keep it clear and simple.** Team wellness challenges should be easy to understand and participate in. Too many competition elements or rules are a turnoff and complicate communication.

2. **Make all elements real.** While online tools make administration and support easier, team challenges should have a heavy dose of on-the-ground, face-to-face activities. Live kickoff events, weekly group activities, and celebratory wrapup gatherings create memorable moments teammates can share for years — something you just can’t achieve virtually, no matter how many badges you give out.

3. **Set challenging, yet achievable team wellness goals as the measure of success.** Objectives should be entirely group focused, with each participant having a meaningful role in contributing to the team’s overall success.

4. **Limit wellness challenge team size.** Social loafing occurs when members slack off because they feel less responsible for team results — usually because the team is too big. It’s a phenomenon in all types of teams, and it undermines success. Limiting teams to 3-8 members (4 or 5 typically work best) keeps everyone more accountable and prevents social loafing.

5. **Put team progress front and center.** Update data in real time as much as possible so teams can view their progress in relation to others. Focus on improvement to keep the emphasis on health rather than winning/losing.

6. **Encourage sustainable wellness habits.** Emphasize consistency over super-human (and ultimately unsustainable) achievements. Keep in mind that health is a journey, not a destination, and you’re trying to reinforce habits that can be maintained over the long term.

7. **Be cautious with inter-department challenges.** You want team participation to be voluntary so motivation bubbles up naturally. Overbearing department managers trying to “win” the wellness challenge can turn off the very people you’re trying to help most and blunt intrinsic motivation.

8. **Highlight achievements of the average participant.** While the exploits of an uber-competitive VP of Finance may have interest to the rest of your organization’s triathletes, more people will be able to relate to the 15-year employee on the line who finally turned a corner through the support of teammates and coworkers.

9. **Keep recognition team-oriented.** Pride swells when individuals feel they’ve made a significant contribution to the team and increases the chances of long-term personal health improvement. Don’t cheapen the accomplishments with cash rewards or lavish incentives.

10. **Evaluate, rinse, repeat.** You’ll learn something new each time you evaluate a wellness team challenge. Ask 2 simple, open-ended questions:

   a. What did you like most about the wellness campaign?

   b. What did you like least?

   Then categorize the comments so you can focus on the things you want to build on and those you need to fix.

A lot of wellness programs focus on throwing health information at people. Get more exercise, get more vegetables, get more sleep, get preventive care… blah, blah, blah. It’s the wrong approach because it’s boring — and because feeding people the facts doesn’t change behavior.

When done right, team wellness competitions offer a more human approach — they appeal to our sense of fun, our thirst for meaningful social connections, and our appetite for a good challenge. Most of all, they give us a reason to try harder than ever because the success of our team is at stake.

Team members benefit from collective knowledge, experience, and wisdom. They’re each other’s advocates as they all aim for the same targets together — a healthier lifestyle and enhanced well-being.

If you’re not tapping into the power of team challenges, you’re missing a huge opportunity to infuse your wellness program with the energy and inspiration needed to make a real difference in your population.
Conclusions

- Team-based wellness challenges boost participation and engagement because they’re fun, social, and give participants the satisfaction of contributing to the success of a group.

- Friendly team wellness competitions cultivate and reinforce a positive, productive work environment and help reset workplace norms that foster a culture of health.

- The team challenge approach to wellness results in better engagement and results.

Leadership Matters

Managers and other leaders can amplify team participation and results with these tips:

- **Be a role model.** Join a team to experience the challenge along with everyone else — and share your success story. You’ll send a message that wellness is a top priority and everyone needs to be involved.

- **Set expectations.** Without leadership support, your wellness program will fall flat. Make it clear that all leadership levels are expected to participate in and support wellness initiatives — better yet, build it into performance reviews.

- **Deliver team training.** Practices that enhance team effectiveness translate into better individual performance as well: improve wellness engagement, improve productivity.

- **Recognize wellness achievements.** Publicly call out high-performing wellness teams, thanking them for their efforts toward a more vital workforce and successful organization.

High-Performing Wellness Teams

Before launching wellness challenges, coach employees on the basics of effective teamwork, including these tips:

- **Zero in.** Establishing clear goals and making sure each member understands how individual performance contributes to team success are essential. In fact, team goal setting improves cohesion and cooperation, making success more likely. Setting SMART goals — specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timed — will get teammates moving together in the right direction.

- **Become a valuable team player.** Team members who communicate well, set a good example, provide helpful advice, and stay focused on team goals can’t be taken for granted. Spell out specifics on how teammates can contribute to the good of the group.

- **Build a tight team.** Each member can have a hand in strengthening team connections by taking the initiative to reach out to others — forming walking groups, sharing meals, recognizing successes, and solving problems together.
9 Easy Ways to Enhance Wellness Teams

1. Have teams come up with their own names to promote team spirit and a sense of group identification — plus, it adds to the fun.

2. Encourage teams to eat together once a week — simply sitting together or holding a potluck featuring their favorite healthy recipes. Relaxed conversation over a meal is a great way to strengthen bonds.

3. Cultivate opportunities for group physical activity such as walking, running, stair climbing, or onsite fitness classes. Promote team participation in 5K/10K runs or volkssport walks. There’s something about being active together that makes people more invested in each other’s wellness success.

4. Urge team members to recognize accomplishments. They could send motivational texts or e-cards, invite others to join in a lunchtime workout, or offer virtual high-fives on the program discussion board. Acknowledgment from someone who’s noticed your hard work is inspiring.

5. Fan the flames of friendly competition by reporting on team progress through internal social media. “Facilities Fiends are pulling ahead of the Winter Wanderers… and have moved up 3 slots in the overall rankings.”

6. Give away T-shirts to the first 10 teams that register; ask members to wear them on Fridays. Even something this simple helps build team identity and pride.

7. Provide each team a $5/member budget to design and print their own team T-shirts or mugs (they’ll no doubt have to kick in extra money, but that too contributes to a feeling of being invested in their team).

8. Hold fun competitions during lunch breaks. Program-related trivia challenges, a bake-off, and a food drive for charity are just a few ideas.

9. Applaud team efforts throughout the challenge — and not just those in 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place. Give a shout-out to teams that have made the most progress in the program’s first few weeks, those with the most team spirit, or those showing an outstanding level of teamwork. A little recognition goes a long way in keeping teams engaged and motivated.
Team Participation Dramatically Improves Registration, Engagement, Outcomes*

When it comes to specific objectives, participants on teams are more likely to reach the target by a wide margin...

- 30+ minutes of exercise, 5 or more days a week: +58%
- 5 or more produce servings a day and 30+ minutes of exercise, 5 or more days a week: +84%
- Energy balance and stress reduction behaviors: +59%
- Daily walking goal of 30 minutes, 5 or more days a week: +42%
- Daily walking goal of 10,000 steps a day: +44%
- 5 or more produce servings a day: +90%
- 30+ minutes of exercise, 5 or more days a week: +64%
- Behaviors that contribute to a healthy weight: +14%

*Team participation results in Health Enhancement Systems programs, 2009-2012.
A Wellness Story: The Power of Teams and Social Connections

Martha, a 4’ 11” 30-something woman I knew only in passing at my Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas job as fitness manager, came up to thank me during our wrapup celebration for the Presidential Fitness Award program. “You’re welcome,” I replied. “How did it work for you?” Her eyes immediately went misty and she proceeded to tell me how she never thought she would feel this good again. While I could tell the 100 or so folks at the event were clearly pleased with what they had accomplished and many had shared encouraging successes along the way, Martha’s story was different.

Diagnosed with arthritis in her teens, she’d been getting progressively more limited in everyday activities while battling increasing inflammation and pain. She had joined our center just a year earlier. While the water aerobics class Martha attended on Tuesdays and Thursdays was a brief respite from her constant affliction, it hadn’t helped her get better, but merely slowed the march of the insidious disease.

Then Linda, a friend she’d shared a ride with to our facility, asked Martha if she wanted to join her and a couple of others in the new fitness challenge. She initially declined, saying there was no way she could keep up with Linda’s non-arthritic friends. But after much persistence and assurance that they weren’t out to win, but to support each other in doing more, Martha’s commuter buddy convinced her to make the commitment.

“I had no idea how I was going to make it” Martha explained. “I couldn’t even walk around the track twice without needing to take a break.” (The center has an indoor track that’s 14 laps to a mile.) But after 3 months of consistent exercise, where she pushed herself to do a little more each day, Martha was not only walking 35-40 minutes a day, 5 days a week, she was strength training twice a week. “If you had told me back in January that I could walk over 2 miles without stopping and could lift 15-pound dumbbells 20 times, I would have laughed at you.”

“My friends meant everything to me...”

Although the program didn’t have a formal team competition, the 4 women decided to participate as a team. They met weekly to outline how many miles they would walk or jog and how many total exercise minutes they would accumulate. They exercised together at least once a week and kept a team progress chart. They called each other when someone missed a scheduled exercise day. And they had fun.

“My new friends didn’t cut me any slack because of my condition. It was just assumed that we would all contribute in equal amounts. I’ll be honest — it scared me at first. This was more exercise than I had done since I was a little girl. What if I couldn’t do it? What if I let my friends down?”

As Martha continued to take me along her 3-month journey she shared not just the thrill of achieving something physically that she never thought she could do, but also her mental and emotional transformation. “I went from the idea of trying to cope with my illness to conquering it. About 2 months into the challenge, it suddenly hit me that I was in control, not my arthritis.” This is the point where my eyes got a little watery, too. “Just 3 months ago I honestly thought that for the rest of my life my disease would only get worse...”

In that moment, early April 1986, Martha’s story changed my outlook on wellness and behavior change (and ultimately led to founding Health Enhancement Systems 8 years later). I had been trained in exercise physiology — where everyone was supposed to go through a fitness test, get an “exercise prescription,” and consult their doctor if they had been sedentary. The prevailing idea was if people simply knew what to do and that it was good for them, they would do it.

Martha changed all that for me. She showed me that overcoming big health challenges is about people... not heart rates, or METS, or exercise prescriptions. She showed me the strength of friends working together to achieve something greater than they could do alone. She showed me that even when the odds are stacked against you, a person’s unwillingness to let their friends down can overcome not only inertia, but physical pain. She showed me my life’s work.
Endnotes/References


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