

WHY LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT MAKES OR BREAKS WORKPLACE WELLNESS

The one thing every successful wellness program has in common isn't fancy equipment or trendy classes—it's leadership that actually gives a damn.

When the Cleveland Clinic decided to transform from a "sickness business" to a "health business," CEO Dr. Delos Cosgrove didn't just send out a supportive email. He created entirely new C-suite positions: Chief Wellness Officer, Chief Experience Officer (originally Chief Empathy Officer), and even an Arts Program Curator. That's not lip service. That's restructuring your entire organization around a new priority.

The Problem with Half-Hearted Wellness

We've all seen it: the wellness program that lives on the HR intranet page nobody visits. The gym membership discount buried in benefits materials. The fruit bowl in the break room that someone's admin ordered once.



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These token gestures fail because they're not actually strategic priorities. They're check-boxes. And employees can smell the difference from a mile away.

Under CEO Cosgrove's leadership, prevention became a board-level strategic priority with real budget, real accountability, and real consequences.

What Real Leadership Looks Like

Here's what leadership commitment looked like in practice:

New Executive Positions Were Created

- Chief Wellness Officer (Dr. Michael Roizen) – whose entire job was making prevention financially viable
- Chief Experience Officer – because how employees experience health support matters
- Arts Program Curator – integrating healing environments into the physical space

These weren't project managers or coordinators reporting to someone five levels down. These were executives with budget authority reporting directly to the CEO.

The CEO Made It Personal Dr. Cosgrove personally championed the controversial decision to make the campus tobacco-free and stop hiring smokers. He fought internal resistance. He explained the decision publicly. He owned it.

When your CEO is willing to make unpopular decisions and defend them, people notice.

Leadership backed the initiative with substantial investment in::

- Dedicated facilities for wellness programs
- Full-time staff with appropriate credentials
- Free programs for all employees (not reimbursement-based)
- Technology platforms for tracking and support
- Multi-year commitment despite uncertain short-term ROI

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The Message This Sends

When leadership creates new executive positions, allocates substantial budget, and personally participates in wellness initiatives, they send an unmistakable message:

"Your health matters to this organization. Not just because it affects our bottom line (though it does), but because we believe investing in keeping you healthy is the right thing to do."

That message changes culture. It makes wellness participation normal instead of weird. It makes taking a yoga class during lunch feel supported instead of sneaky.

What You Can Do (Even If You're Not a Hospital)

You don't need massive resources to demonstrate real leadership commitment:

Appoint a Senior Wellness Leader Someone who reports directly to executive leadership and has budget authority. Not an HR generalist with twelve other responsibilities. A dedicated leader.

Frame Wellness as Business Imperative Stop calling it a perk. It's cost control. It's productivity enhancement. It's retention strategy. Make the business case and stick to it.

Secure Executive Sponsorship Your CEO, CFO, or another C-suite leader needs to champion this publicly and participate personally. Executives doing walking meetings or attending stress management workshops sends a powerful signal.

Set Measurable Goals "Improve employee wellness" is not a goal. "Reduce health insurance premium growth from 12% to 6% over three years" is a goal. "Increase percentage of employees with controlled blood pressure from 65% to 80%" is a goal.

Specific, measurable targets make wellness a strategic initiative instead of a nice idea.

THE BOTTOM LINE



The Lifestyle 180 program demonstrated that prevention can slow healthcare cost growth while improving employee health. But its success started with leadership commitment—not just verbal support, but structural change that embedded wellness into the organization's DNA.

Your wellness program doesn't need a bigger budget. It needs leadership that treats it like the strategic priority it is.

When your CEO creates a Chief Wellness Officer position, your employees will believe wellness matters. When executives participate in programs, employees will too. When substantial budget is allocated year after year, wellness becomes sustainable.

Half-hearted support gets half-hearted results.

Real commitment changes culture.