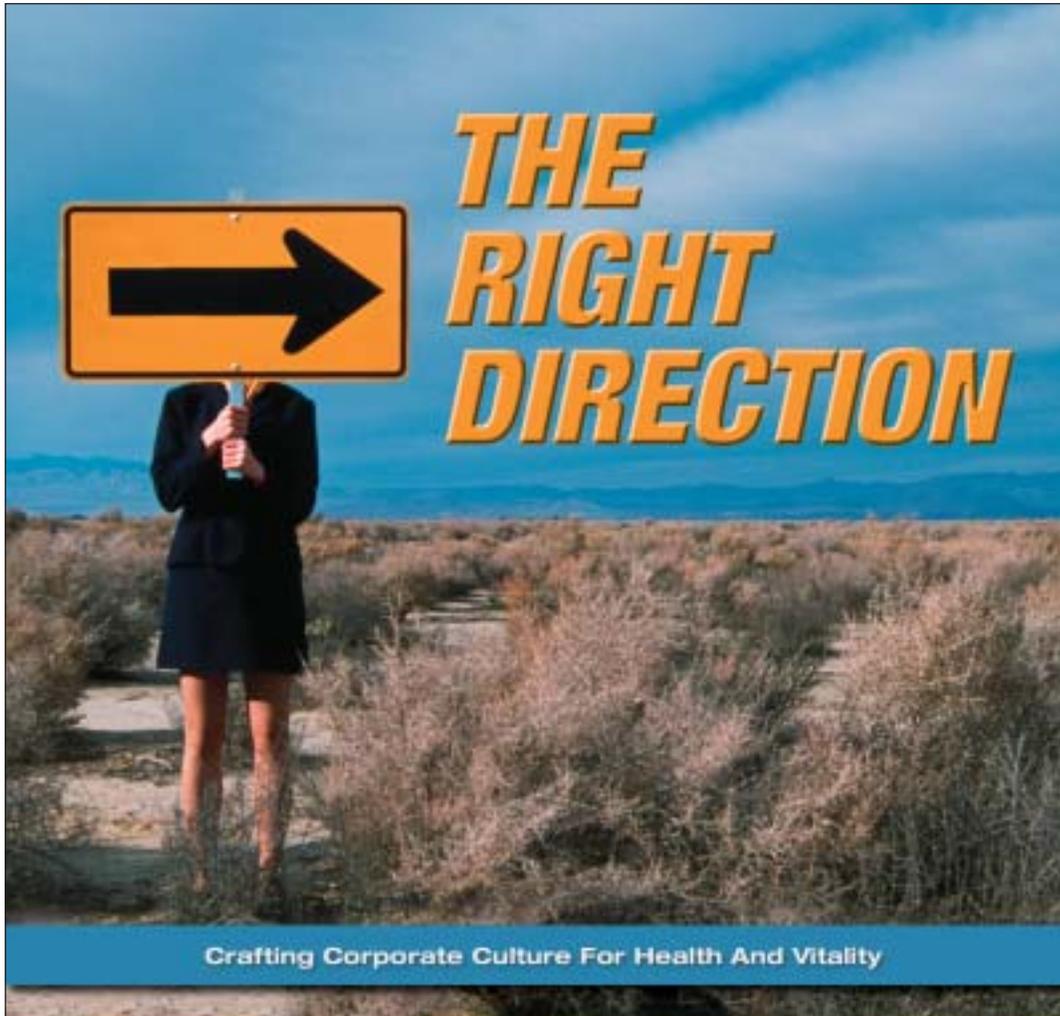


# Absolute ADVANTAGE

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THE WORKPLACE WELLNESS MAGAZINE



#### IN THIS ISSUE:

Being successful in today's business environment takes more than just the ability to produce goods better, faster, and cheaper. What's more, business leaders must position their organizations as valued partners, not just run-of-the-mill vendors. A healthy corporate culture helps achieve both of these goals. In this issue of *Absolute Advantage*, we'll examine workplace culture—how to measure it, how to shape it, and how to evaluate it. As the marketplace evolves, make sure to utilize the power of a healthy corporate culture at your organization, and move your business in the right direction.



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# THE MENTORING MODEL

Peer support for health behavior change is a key component of most culture change initiatives. Dr. Judd Allen provides a framework for developing this all-important one-on-one connection.

**BY JUDD ALLEN, PhD**

Each year most people make health-related resolutions. If a majority of these attempts to exercise regularly, lose weight, manage stress, stop smoking, improve social relationships, and cut substance abuse were to be successful, then a large proportion of health risks would be eliminated. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people making lifestyle change attempts do not achieve their long-term goals. Lasting and positive lifestyle change is one of the most important and elusive challenges faced by health promotion practitioners. Most benefits associated with new healthy lifestyle choices are contingent upon long-term behavior change. Failed lifestyle change is an added source of stress for those who fail and can diminish their self-esteem. Ongoing support is needed to sustain lifestyle change efforts. Wellness mentoring initiatives are designed to increase lifestyle change success rates by enhancing the quality and quantity of the naturally occurring peer support network.

### **The Roots Of Wellness Mentoring**

Wellness mentoring is a theory-based framework for empowering peers to more effectively provide one-to-one support for lasting lifestyle change. Peer support is one of five factors—norms, values, organizational support, climate and peer support—that has been the focus of culture change initiatives.

The wellness mentoring initiative was first developed for Union Pacific Railroad as a strategy for increasing coworker support for healthy lifestyle choices. Employees completed a *Lifegain Health Culture Audit* survey that asked them to rate the level of support they got from friends, family, coworkers, supervisors, and top management. Some support was reported by most employees, and approximately 25 percent of employees reported that coworkers, supervisors, or top management “almost always” supported their health improvement efforts. Although these results were similar to those found in other settings, the railroad sought to create a subculture that would more fully support healthy lifestyles. The wellness mentoring initiative was developed to address this need.

Over the past seven years, the wellness mentoring approach has been used in businesses, schools, religious organizations, spas, fitness facilities, and entire communities. The potential program benefits include:

- **Providing Ongoing Support.** Program duration appears to be an important success factor in health and productivity promotion. The end of the supportive program often coincides with the end of the lifestyle change. Because peers work and live together, they are available to provide ongoing assistance beyond what is available in a typical health and productivity program.
- **Broadening Participation.** A mentoring initiative increases the number and diversity of effective health and productivity program champions. Because it is a volunteer activity, a mentor program is a cost-effective approach to reaching underserved populations. Mentor training gives more people a health and productivity promotion role.
- **Reducing Social Isolation.** Mentoring is a health-enhancing way for people to connect. Interpersonal ties at work, at home, and in the community have declined approximately 20 percent in recent years. For example, shorter job tenure, more part-time and temporary jobs, and increased independent consultancy inhibit workplace-based social ties. The negative consequences of social isolation have been identified as a major health risk factor. In addition, a lack of positive social relationships makes it more difficult for someone to overcome addiction.

### **The Mentoring Role**

The role of mentor is particularly well suited to providing effective peer support for lifestyle change. The word mentor comes from Homer’s ancient Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, was leaving to fight in the Trojan War and needed to find someone who could help his independent-minded son, Telemachus, learn to be a king. Odysseus chose a man named Mentor because he recognized that Mentor had special skills. Recognizing that his personal experiences would have limited value, Mentor taught by asking questions. Mentor also saw the

value of learning through personal exploration. Mentor encouraged Telemachus to pursue his natural inclinations and to change directions on the basis of what he was learning. Mentor’s strategy worked. Telemachus went on to become a helpful son and great leader.

Consistent with the principles of adult learning and the role of Mentor in *The Odyssey*, wellness mentors help primarily by embracing the learning and growth of someone else. As in Homer’s *Odyssey*, an effective wellness mentor recognizes that he or she does not need to have direct personal experience with a particular lifestyle-change goal. Therefore, mentors are more likely to offer thought-provoking questions than advice. In addition, a mentor understands that knowledge unfolds during the process of attempting lifestyle change. Wellness mentors create safe and caring relationships for exploring lifestyle change. They schedule informal meetings with their peers to discuss progress. During these meetings, mentors ask questions that are useful for planning lifestyle change. Unlike therapists, counselors or coaches, mentors volunteer their time and do not claim an area of health and productivity expertise. Mentors embrace the goals of their peers and assist them in gaining access to needed information and other resources.

Wellness mentors draw upon a skill set that is common to effective peer support for lifestyle change. Although the lifestyle goals will vary from time to time and from individual to individual, the basic mentoring approach remains fairly consistent. These mentoring skills draw upon established behavioral science theories including the Transtheoretical Model, Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Learning Theory, Conditioning Theory, and Relapse Prevention. The eight primary mentoring skills are:

1. **Establishing Trust and Openness.** To be effective, mentors need to be able to maintain confidentiality and to quickly develop a relationship that is based on mutual understanding.
2. **Defining the Wellness Mentor Concept.** The terms wellness and mentor can be confusing. Therefore, it

is important to come up with definitions that express the true quality-of-life vision of wellness and how the mentor role differs from other, more familiar, roles such as therapist or teacher. In addition, mentors need to understand how and when to make appropriate referrals to health professionals. Mentors working within an organization also need to understand how their mentoring efforts fit within its overall health and productivity program.

3. **Setting Goals.** Mentors should learn how to assist in establishing lifestyle change priorities and recognize progress through the stages of lifestyle change.
4. **Identifying Role Models.** Mentors should be able to help peers find appropriate role models who will share their success experiences to inform and inspire. Mentors must learn how to find role models from a variety of sources such as peer networks, associations, and publications.
5. **Eliminating Barriers.** Lack of time, money, and confidence can stand in the way of success. Mentors should learn how to help their peers recognize potential barriers and develop creative strategies for overcoming barriers to change.
6. **Locating Supportive Environments.** The right physical and social environments can make lasting lifestyle change easier to accomplish. Mentors can help peers identify supportive environments and develop strategies both for gaining access to such supportive environments and for avoiding hostile settings.
7. **Working Through Relapse.** The path to successful lifestyle change is not always a straight line. Mentors should learn how to help prevent relapse and how to help someone reassess goals and strategies to get back on track.
8. **Celebrating Success.** Positive behavior should have its rewards. Mentors learn how to develop fun and meaningful celebrations throughout the lifestyle change process.

### **Building Upon The Mentoring Tradition**

Mentoring is common in American worksites. In one study of 1,250 prominent executives, nearly two-thirds reported that having a mentor or sponsor was a major

determining factor in their success. The goals of worksite mentoring programs range from succession planning, to increasing performance, to increasing employee diversity, to following up on training initiatives.

Healthy lifestyle change has not been the focus of research on the impact of mentoring at the worksite. However, many worksite programs use volunteers. In one such program, six employee volunteers led weight-reduction groups. Comparisons revealed that professional-led and volunteer-led groups did equally well in promoting weight loss.

Research at the worksite has generated a few general principles for effective mentoring. Poe found that the effectiveness of mentoring at the worksite is determined by whether there is a good match between the expectations of the participants and the mentors. Poe also found that effectiveness increased when mentors developed clear standards for maintaining confidentiality. Studies at Ford and J.P. Morgan found that it is important for mentor program participants to know from the start what they want from the process.

### **Program Design**

The basic outline of a mentoring program includes participant recruitment, training, and follow-up support. These activities must be directed at achieving a high quality mentoring experience. Suggestions for each element follow.

**Recruitment.** It is likely that wellness mentoring will be a new concept for the setting. Therefore, it is helpful to define the program and its benefits in such a way that most people will feel comfortable serving as a mentor and being mentored. For example, people may not realize that most of their peers are attempting lifestyle changes. They may also be unaware that their support is needed to increase the likelihood that those health-related resolutions will be kept. Learning mentoring skills should be presented as an important way to become a better coworker, family member, or friend. In addition, mentoring skills should be portrayed as useful to self-improvement.

Recruit and train as many people as possible. It is important to train an adequate number of mentors to accommodate high demand and program attrition, and to create a diverse network of available mentors. To achieve this recruitment goal,

integrate the mentoring program into existing policies, traditions, and procedures. For example, mentor training can become a part of the orientation process. Mentor training should be included in leadership development offerings and certifications. If it is customary for a group to have a retreat, then the mentor training should be a retreat activity. The training can also be used to launch a new wellness program or other organizational development initiative.

**Training.** It is most common for the core training content to be delivered during a four-hour session that combines formal lecture with group exercises. However, it is possible to divide the training into brief segments that cover the eight core mentoring skills.

Videos and resource manuals are frequently made available to training participants. These materials are designed to be used during mentoring sessions.

An important part of the training is follow-up practice. One strategy is to pair participants during the training and have them schedule follow-up practice sessions with their assigned partner. Later, it is often helpful for the larger group to meet again to discuss any issues that emerged during the practice sessions.

It is highly recommended that mentoring programs be tailored to the goals and culture of each setting. The overall approach can be adapted to a variety of people and settings. For example, Chevron organized its mentor training material into a game format. Teams worked together to support lifestyle change. Union Pacific Railroad uses videos to supplement its training. For example, the company developed a fun detective video about mentoring. This video format makes it possible to reach the company's geographically dispersed workforce.

**Follow-up Support.** Upon graduation, most mentoring trainees are excited about their new skills and look forward to putting them to good use. Mentors will want to know how they can find people to mentor. They will also wonder how best to fit their mentoring into their schedules. And they will want to know where to go for professional assistance. Follow-up support should address these needs.

An effective mentor referral system is an important program component. Referral opportunities tend to arise when people are examining their personal health. New

Year's Day is a traditional holiday for setting health resolutions, but people also examine their lifestyles when visiting their doctors, after a medical emergency, or after a major life transition. The feedback session following a health risk appraisal is a good time for a mentor referral. The mentor referral system can also be a part of the follow-up to traditional health and productivity program offerings such as seminars, classes, and the distribution of self-help materials.

Since mentoring is a new role to most people, it is essential that adequate cultural mechanisms be put in place to support ongoing mentoring practice. The following primary cultural influences can be used to organize a culture shift that supports mentoring.

### **Modeling**

- Leaders participate in the mentor training.
- Leaders share stories of how a mentor has helped them personally.
- Successful mentors serve as role models for new mentors.
- Those who have achieved lifestyle change explain how they worked with their mentor.

### **Rewards and Recognition**

- Mentors are rewarded and recognized for their efforts.
- Participants are rewarded and recognized for their lifestyle change accomplishments.

### **Confrontation**

- Social barriers to program participation are eliminated.
- Those who interfere with participation in the program are confronted.

### **Training**

- Mentor training is made available to those who did not participate initially.
- Mentors receive follow-up training in peer support.
- Mentors are kept informed about available topic-specific health and productivity programs (for example, a stress management workshop).

### **Communication**

- The mentor program's vision is shared with the population on a regular basis.

- Mentors are given a forum for sharing their experiences with other mentors.
- A feedback mechanism is established between mentors and program coordinators.
- The program is evaluated and results are shared.

### **Relationships**

- Wellness-oriented social functions make it likely that program participants will become friends.
- Conflicts are dealt with in a dignified and constructive manner.

### **Resource Commitment**

- Those involved in the program are given time for mentoring activities.
- Suitable spaces are available for mentoring sessions.
- Participants are given access to health information and/or mini-grants to support lifestyle change.

### **Rites and Rituals**

- Anniversaries, holidays, and rites of passage are used to support program goals.
- New traditions are developed to support the mentoring program.

### **Orientation**

- New people are made aware of the commitment to the mentoring program.
- New people receive mentor training.

### **Recruitment and Selection**

- The setting publicizes the mentor program as a benefit of joining.

- Openness to the mentoring concept is one of the criteria for being recruited and selected.

Quality control is another important aspect of follow-up support. Mentors and those being mentored are encouraged to contact the program coordinator about questions and concerns. In addition, participants complete periodic surveys about the quality of their experience. In some academic settings, program participants complete a mentoring journal that is shared with the program instructor or teaching assistant. Feedback is used to determine if additional mentor training or if other corrective counseling is needed. In some cases, the program coordinator may reassign a protégé to a new mentor and/or determine that a particular mentor drop out of the program.

### **Mentoring Can Help Create a Supportive Culture**

Humans' need for each other must not be seen as an obstacle to overcome, but rather a virtue to be celebrated. Wellness mentoring can help us achieve our individual lifestyle goals while enjoying the many benefits of strong social ties and a sense of community. Health and productivity programs must take advantage of the high levels of individual initiative now common in most settings. When someone expresses an interest in change, health and productivity programs must either find or build supportive physical and social environments. Peers can play an important role in meeting this need. The mentoring approach invigorates peer support networks for this purpose. ★

#### **ABOUT THE EXPERT: Judd Allen, PhD**

Dr. Allen is President of the Human Resources Institute, a research, publishing, and consulting firm that focuses on the creation of supportive cultural environments. Dr. Allen has authored more than 50 books, journal articles, training manuals, and software titles. In addition, he is featured in a number of videos about leadership, peer support, mentoring, and the creation of a healthy work climate. Dr. Allen has assisted over a thousand government, business and community settings to bring about lasting and positive culture change. Dr. Allen can be reached at [JuddA@healthyculture.com](mailto:JuddA@healthyculture.com) or by calling (802) 862-8855.

