

Good Health is Good Business

By Dr. Dennis McClain



Like all of you, I have groaned at the gas pump as the price for regular unleaded fuel reached four bucks a gallon. Unfortunately, my old sedan is supposed to be fed a high octane fuel which pushes the price even higher. I have been obedient to this demand for years without much thought, until recently. My car is not a high performance vehicle so why should it require premium fuel? I decided it was probably a conspiracy between the engine manufacturer and the gasoline companies. I tested my theory with a tank of regular low octane. My reward was a car that ran lousy for the next 300 miles – ping-pong, missing, and actually getting worse mileage, thus costing more in the long run.

As small business owners, we face some difficult economic realities and all try to avoid unnecessary expenditures. When it comes to the health and well-being of our employees, trying to skimp is sometimes like the above scenario with my car. Our employees are the fuel that drives the engine of our business. It makes sense to ensure that they are in optimal condition to do their job, but is that cost effective?

Employees who suffer from poor health and deconditioning are costing us higher injury rates, higher insurance and benefit rates, absenteeism, and “presenteeism”. Presenteeism refers to the employee who is “on” the job but not really “in” the job – not producing at full capacity. Perhaps it is because their blood sugar is out of control or they have migraine headaches. Depression alone accounts for huge losses in lack of productivity. What to do?

First, understand the huge impact employee health has on your bottom line. The intangibles – lost productivity and lost time far outweigh any direct medical expenses. Many good studies have laid to rest any argument about return on investment in your human capital.

Second, boldly begin the process of change within your organization. Corporate wellness programs are springing back to life with a vigor not seen since the jogging craze of the late 70s. Simple measures can be instituted that will encourage employees to become healthier and more productive by: having the fat and sugar laden snack food machines removed from the break room; regularly arranging for someone to bring in fresh fruit; banning smoking from your workplace and offering incentives to those who will quit altogether; and hosting special speakers for meetings or lunches to discuss diet and exercise. Health fairs can be another great way to motivate others to action.

As your program evolves, take it to another level. Most small companies cannot afford to have a full-time medical staff. Bring in a nurse practitioner or a doctor for a few hours every month to help your team members stay focused on managing their health. In addition, providers at this level can often treat urgent care type problems that will eliminate the need for your employee to take off work that half-day to see a doctor. Problems can be identified before they become costly and out of control. Serious or chronic problems can be coordinated with their primary care physicians for ongoing management.

Consider this scenario. Your employee Thelma, age 41, works day shift and has been with your company for five years. Thelma is a single mom with three school-age children. Life isn’t easy for Thelma. Being on a limited budget, most of her meals come out of the microwave, sloshed down with a gallon-size soda pop. She is diabetic but doesn’t really attempt to eat properly. Her blood sugar runs about 280 (not good) on most days. Not coincidentally, her weight in pounds matches her blood sugar level. She smokes about a pack of cigarettes per day. Home life is a boring routine played out monotonously 24/7.

Thelma works on your production line and shows up for work depressed, fatigued, dizzy and overdosed on nicotine and caffeine. Kentuckiana is full of Thelma’s. As physicians, we have seen her in our clinics, offices, and emergency rooms. How productive do you think Thelma can be today?

Contrast Thelma with Louise. Louise is also in her early forties and has been employed by the same company for the past five years. Louise has lost 62 pounds over the last two years, thanks to a company-sponsored program of diet and nutrition. Her diabetes once required her to take two medications daily, but they didn’t really control her blood sugar. Now her blood sugar level is

well-controlled on one medication and her doctor thinks that it may not be necessary much longer. Louise gradually quit smoking over the past six months. When cigarettes were banned from the company property where she worked, she was motivated to sign up for the smoking cessation classes that were being offered. With the money she has saved on cigarettes and medication, Louise has started taking karate lessons three nights per week. Louise teases that she has more energy now than she did as a kid. Louise works on the production line across from Thelma. How productive do you think Louise can be today?

My point is this: You have been blessed with a great opportunity to change Thelma into Louise. You don’t even have to be philanthropic by nature to make it happen, just frugal. Every dollar you spend to help the transformation will be returned to you at least threefold. A team of Louises will significantly add to your bottom line and you will have the satisfaction of knowing you improved the quality of life for someone entrusted to your care.

I encourage you to start today. Go high octane and see if your operation doesn’t run more smoothly and give you better mileage.



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