

Behavior Change that Lasts: Institute Learnings



**National
Business
Group on
Health**



Over the past decade, research has provided new insights into what leads people to change their behavior. Much of this research comes from fields outside the employer market—for example, behavioral economics, gaming and social sciences—and remains a largely untapped wealth of ideas for employers.

To help catalog these concepts and build a roadmap for future action, the Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being looks back at the expert researchers who have presented to its Board over the past eight years. This document highlights their most important messages—from the importance of having reasonable versus unreasonable goals, to peer influences, to the power of immediate desires and rewards—and identifies eight ways that repeatedly emerge for employers to improve long-term behavior change.

Nicholas Christakis, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.

Sol Goldman Family Professor of Social and Natural Science, Yale University

Author, *Connected: How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do*

Peers influence nearly everything we do. That was the lesson Nicholas Christakis presented to the Leadership Summit on Workforce Well-being in 2006. Most importantly, Christakis's research shows that health behaviors—both good and bad—can spread through social networks. If Sue's close friend, Jane, gains weight, there is a 57% increase in the likelihood that Sue will gain weight. Fortunately, social networks can also help individuals improve health

behaviors. Smoking cessation by one spouse increases the chance of the other quitting by 67%; smoking cessation by a respected co-worker increases the likelihood of tobacco cessation by 34%.

Christakis suggested that health, health care and health behaviors may have interpersonal “collateral effects.” To improve the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of health programs, employers should focus programs at the group level. Employers can do this by leveraging natural peer groups, launching programs by work unit/location, and allowing participants to enroll or invite a friend.

Brian Wansink, Ph.D.

Director, Cornell Food and Brand Lab
Author, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*



We don't have to remain powerless over our food intake, according to Brian Wansink. On the contrary, the author of “Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think” presented to the 2007 Leadership Summit attendees his research on why we are compelled to eat more than we need—and strategies to help us eat less.

According to Wansink, the environment within which we eat influences our food choices and intake enormously. His research showed:

- Food placement matters (moving food even six feet away decreases consumption);
- Serving plate size and shape matter (we eat more from larger, stout containers than from tall, thin ones);
- Evidence matters (if we have proof of how much we eat, we stop eating sooner); and
- The number of options matters (more options equal more intake).

Fortunately, employers can make small changes to the food environment to have a positive impact on eating habits. Drawing on choice architecture, Wansink's research suggests employers can improve healthy eating by designing strategies that help people overcome their own innate weaknesses. For example, employers can eliminate unhealthy food at checkout locations, use small serving dishes in cafeterias, and reduce the number of food options served in a buffet to help improve employees' diets.

“Most people believe they are Master and Commander of their food choices. I want them to see that they aren't. But I also want them to see that they can make small changes that can put them back in the driver's seat.”

Brian Wansink, Ph.D.

Foodpsychology.cornell.edu
MindlessEating.org



“The key to promoting lasting healthier lifestyles and achieving sustained weight-loss is engagement. Employers can influence employee engagement in wellness and behavior change by offering evidence-based behavioral modification programming. Today, new technologies help meet employees where they are, and whenever they need support.”

Karen Miller-Kovach, Ph.D.

Karen Miller-Kovach, Ph.D.

Co-Chief Scientific Officer, Weight Watchers International

On numerous occasions, Karen Miller-Kovach has shared with Leadership Summit on Workforce Well-being attendees and Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being Board members what it takes to lose weight and maintain it. As the obesity epidemic continues around the globe, her science-based advice remains as important today as when first presented.

In 2006, Kovach was one of the first to highlight the importance of the family in changing health behaviors. She outlined for Summit attendees five steps that parents can take to improve the likelihood of lasting change for the entire family. In 2007, Kovach returned to highlight research demonstrating four factors associated with reaching a weight-loss goal and sustaining the loss. These factors included the importance of self-monitoring—a critical issue in today’s era of the “quantified self”—as well as the importance of regular physical activity, social support and behavior modification techniques such as appropriate goal setting. Finally, she shared the finding that lasting weight loss is much

more likely if three conditions are met: (1) Weight loss is a high priority to the individual (not just desirable, but truly a top priority); (2) the individual has confidence in his or her personal ability to lose weight; and (3) he or she has confidence in the method or program selected.

Charles Duhigg

Reporter, The New York Times

Author, *The Power of Habit*

Can employees develop new habits? That is the question Charles Duhigg helped answer at the 2012 Leadership Summit on Workforce Well-being. According to Duhigg, habits account for 40% of our daily behaviors. But habits are not necessarily stagnant. On the contrary, studies show you can diagnose and change your habits.

According to Duhigg, habits consist of three elements that make up the habit loop: the cue, the reward and the routine. Every habit is initiated by a cue—or a trigger. Cues can be locations, time of day, emotions, sights, etc. The routine is the behavior, while the reward is the immediate benefit one gains from doing the behavior. By analyzing, implementing and/or changing these three elements, individuals can begin to alter or even stop bad habits, or create new and more positive ones.

H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D.

Professor, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Wesley Perkins presented research at the 2012 Leadership Summit on Workforce Well-being that underscored how greatly an individual is influenced by those around him, and how quickly people will change their behavior to conform to the social norm. Considered “the father of social norms marketing,” Perkins suggested that employers can leverage the power of social norms in their health and wellness communications.

Social norm campaigns have increased safer drinking habits, decreased smoking, increased seat-belt use, led to a decrease in drinking and driving, and decreased bullying behaviors. They have also been used to lessen household energy use, increase recycling, and encourage water conservation and towel reuse in hotels. Employers can implement social norm campaigns by publicizing statistics where at least 50% or more of the employee population is doing the preferred behavior, or wants to do the preferred behavior, in order to help change the behavior of the remaining minority. For example, social norm campaigns may include statistics such as, “9 out of 10 of us do not smoke,” or “7 out of 8 of us think exercise should be a regular activity.”

Robert Maurer, Ph.D.

Professor, UCLA School of Medicine

Author, *One Small Step Can Change Your Life*

In 2011, Robert Maurer introduced to Leadership Summit attendees the importance of small steps in achieving lasting change. According to Maurer, psychological research shows large tasks—such as exercising daily, permanent diets or smoking cessation—can be overwhelming to the point of paralysis. To successfully change behavior and achieve long-term success, Maurer recommends individuals and companies look to the Japanese philosophy of *kaizen*. Kaizen teaches that long-lasting change occurs through very small, steady increments. In his presentation, Maurer gave examples of how small steps in the health behavior area can lead to big changes: losing weight by focusing on eating one bite less each meal, then two bites less a month later; or starting a lifelong exercise program by just standing on the treadmill for one minute a day.



“As humans, we are only capable of taking on so much change at one time. Employers will improve the success of their employees if they help them focus on small things they can do each day to make them safer, healthier and happier. The motto should not be, do it all and do it now; it should be, take one small step that requires little effort and build on it.”

Robert Maurer, Ph.D.



“Require a choice, make the preferred choice the default choice or get employees to precommit. It’s worked for 401(k)s; it’s worked in the pharmacy space, and it’s worked to increase flu shots. Employers should think through the delivery of each of their programs and determine if there is a way to use these tactics.”

Robert Nease, Ph.D.

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Chief Scientist, Express Scripts

Following a dynamic 2010 Board meeting presentation with David Laibson, Ph.D., Harvard University, and the Express Scripts team—including Larry Zarin and Steve Miller—Bob Nease returned to update us on the field of behavioral economics at the 2013 Leadership Summit.

According to research, the conscious brain—the part responsible for making decisions—can only process 50 bits per second, much less than the 10,000,000 bits of information it receives. As a result, people are wired for inertia and inattention. Fortunately, programs can be designed to leverage those tendencies. In particular, Bob suggested employers utilize three options:

1. Require a choice: Make the consumer have to choose one or the other to overcome inertia to not choose either.
2. Leverage inertia: Design the system so that the behavior you want is the default.
3. Request precommitment: Lock in a person’s good intentions early with precommitment and improve engagement rates.

Michelle Segar, Ph.D.

Associate Director, Sport, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center (SHARP)

Policy Fellow, Center for Healthcare Research and Transformation, University of Michigan

“Health promoters should stop promoting health,” was Michelle Segar’s message at the 2013 Leadership Summit on Workforce Well-being. While counterintuitive, the concept of health is too distant and abstract to motivate lasting behavior change for most. According to Segar’s research, when better health is the purpose for a behavior change, the reward is too far off in the future to motivate the consistent decision making necessary to foster health and well-being.

Instead, Segar advises employers to rebrand health as well-being by emphasizing the *daily* benefits and rewards that result from many health behaviors, such as more energy and less stress. Help employees learn that “healthy” choices actually lead to better enjoying and succeeding at their top daily priorities. Creating this new meaning for self-care transforms it from a competing goal into facilitator of what matters most, and builds the autonomous motivation that employees need to achieve lasting behavior change.

B.J. Fogg, Ph.D.

Director, Stanford University Behavior Design Lab

Author, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*

According to B.J. Fogg, three things have to be present simultaneously in order for a behavior to occur: motivation, ability and a trigger. However, “relying on individual willpower or motivation for long-term behavior change is not a winning strategy,” says Fogg. Motivation varies by person, and it can be difficult to sustain over time.

Instead, Fogg told Institute Board members to seek other mechanisms for behavior change. One way to create lasting change is by breaking a behavior down into small, easy-to-do steps. The second is by ensuring there is a trigger for the behavior. Small steps allow individuals to achieve and celebrate success. And no behavior will occur without a trigger.



“Simplicity changes behavior.”

B.J. Fogg, Ph.D.

Lessons Learned: Eight Guiding Principles for Lasting Behavior Change

1. Leverage social influence and social norms.
2. Design programs to incorporate and reward small steps toward lasting behavior change. Small steps allow people to focus and build on what is working.
3. Focus on immediate benefits, not on distant or abstract goals.
4. Create a trigger, or cue, for the behavior. The behavior will not occur without a trigger.
5. Design the environment to influence behavior.
6. Leverage people’s tendency to procrastinate. By requiring them to make a choice or by making the default the preferred option, individuals are more likely to adhere to the preferred course of action.
7. Ask employees to precommit.
8. Help people feel successful.

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Written by:

Dannielle Sherrets, M.P.H.

Assistant Director, Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being

About the Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being

The Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being is part of the National Business Group on Health. The Institute works with large employers on health improvement programs and develops practical and cost-effective solutions to reduce health risks and their cost impact for employees and their families.

About the National Business Group on Health

The Business Group is the only non-profit organization devoted exclusively to representing large employers' perspectives on national health issues and providing solutions to its members' most important health care and health benefits challenges. The Business Group fosters the development of a safe health care delivery system and treatments based on scientific evidence. Members share strategies for controlling costs, improving patient safety and quality of care, increasing productivity and supporting healthy lifestyles.

Top Solutions

National Business Group on Health

20 F Street N.W., Suite 200 • Washington, D.C. 20001-6700

Phone (202) 558-3000 • Fax (202) 628-9244 • www.businessgrouphealth.org

Helen Darling, President and CEO, National Business Group on Health

LuAnn Heinen, Vice President and Director, Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being

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