WELCOA's
News&Views

The FIVE Dimensions...

Creating a Culture of Wellness

A WELCOA Expert Interview with Dr. Judd Allen

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The Five Dimensions:
Creating a Culture of Wellness

An Expert Interview with
DR. JUDD ALLEN

ABOUT **JUDD ALLEN,** PHD

Judd Allen PhD is president of the Human Resources Institute, LLC— a training and publishing organization that focuses on the creation of supportive cultural environments. The work of the Human Resources Institute is founded on a basic premise that groups, organizations and communities are much more likely to achieve their health and productivity goals when supportive cultures are created.

Judd Allen earned his PhD in community psychology from New York University. Dr. Allen serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Health Promotion, and is also a member of the board of directors of the National Wellness Institute. He has authored more than 50 journal articles, training manuals and software titles and many books including *Wellness Leadership: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthier and More Productive Employees*. Dr. Allen has also served on the faculties of New York University, Cornell University Medical College, Johnson State College and Nebraska Methodist College, and is a regular speaker at national and regional conferences.

ABOUT **DAVID HUNNICUTT,** PHD

Since his arrival at WELCOA in 1995, David has interviewed hundreds of the most influential business and health leaders in America. Known for his ability to make complex issues easier to understand, David has a proven track record of asking the right questions and getting straight answers. As a result of his efforts, David's expert interviews have been widely-published and read by workplace wellness practitioners across the country.

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When it comes to workplace wellness programs, unsupportive cultures are the biggest impediment to individual and organizational success.

In this exclusive interview, Dr. Judd Allen shares his expertise on wellness cultures, and offers salient advice for creating healthy environments. He discusses the critical ways in which your company's wellness values influence your employees' health goals, and impact their long-term success. To help you improve your company's support of its wellness programs, Dr. Allen offers guidance for creating policies and altering social and cultural environments that support your wellness initiatives.

With the foundation of a healthy, supportive culture, your workplace wellness programs will thrive—producing results for your company's bottom-line and drastically improving employee health.

> The vast majority of that research is showing that coaching really does work. **It really is effective.**

Q1 What are the elements that make up an organization's culture?

Judd Allen: When I measure culture I divide the work into five dimensions:

One is shared values, which is somewhat similar to priorities. So, a culture might have priorities, and of course, we want to make wellness one of the top priorities.

The second piece is cultural norms. Norms are the established expectations in our work environment. We often have to help people see how certain behaviors, like working through lunch, or eating a high-calorie dessert, are just part of the norms. Employees think they're doing it out of habit or a personal interest, but often it's part of the cultural norms in their workplace.

The third dimension that I look at is called touch points. These are social mechanisms similar to policies and procedures that influence norms. There are 10 touch points including modeling, rewards, push-back, training, communication, traditions, relationships, orientation, recruitment/selection, and resource commitment.

The fourth dimension of culture is peer support, and it involves employees helping each other achieve wellness. We're finding that the peer support mechanism is a very powerful influence on behavior. However, we're also finding that most people have a limited skill set as far as peer support; they need training to more effectively help each other. That training can usually be taken from the coaching skills we have developed, and then giving those skills over to employees so they can help each other.

The final dimension of culture is something we call climate, and climate is the equivalent of morale and teamwork. We look at three aspects of climate. One, we ask if there is a sense of community? Two, is there a shared vision? And three, is there a positive outlook within the organization? These three factors seem to make it easier for people to make positive changes both individually and as groups.

So, we look at all five of those dimensions: shared values, cultural norms, touch points, peer support and climate. We look at the strengths and the opportunities for improvement, and then set some goals for those five dimensions.

Q2 You mentioned social mechanisms that influence norms. Can you briefly touch on those?

JA: Yes, they are significant when it comes to shaping culture over time.

(1) Number one is modeling. Modeling is important because we want wellness role models, and we don't want the leadership in particular to model unhealthy practices.

(2) Rewards and recognition are the ones you'll see a lot in the literature right now. We want to recognize and reward healthy behaviors. However, I want to remind everyone that in workplace culture, we often reward unhealthy practices, such as working through lunch. So, just remember that there are two sides of the reward idea.

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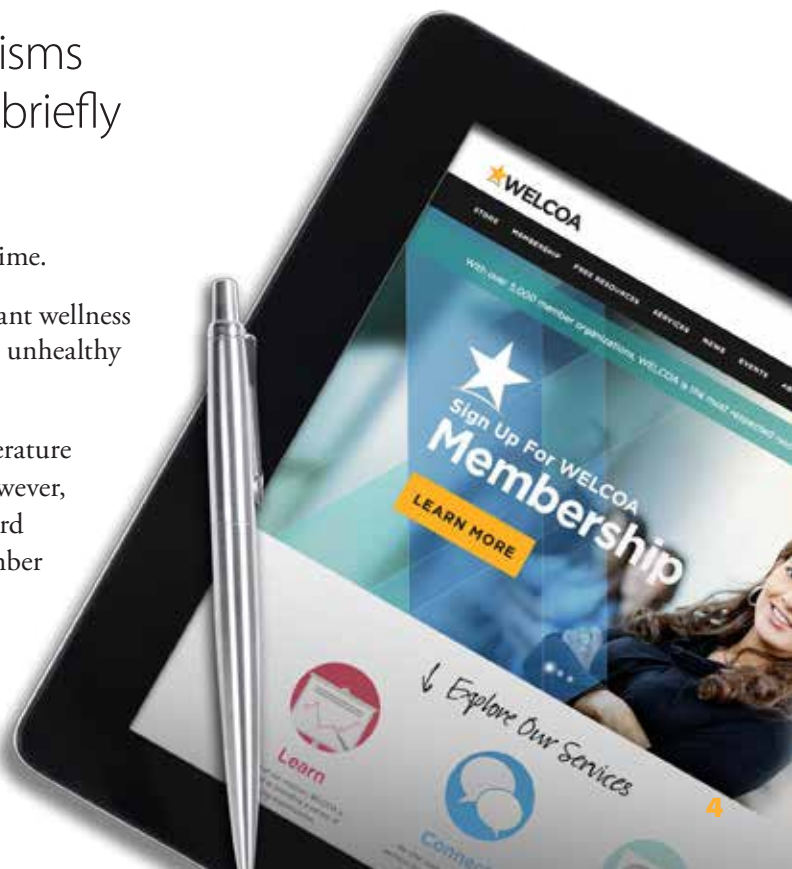
(3) Confrontation or pushback is also important. You don't want healthy ideas or healthy behaviors receiving pushback. There might be pushback around healthy eating. I've seen this in my own life when I changed towards a vegetarian diet. Many people tried to discourage me. We also see such pushback when it comes to stress management. Just practicing stress management techniques in a work setting can make you weird or different. We do want pushback against some unhealthy practices. No smoking policies are an example of such positive pushback.

(4) Another area is training or learning. We want to make sure that people are given the skills they need to be successful in adopting healthy practices. This is particularly important when the broader culture is having trouble with a healthy behavior. There is a great need to teach people skills for healthy eating right now. You need to be trained on how to read all of the ingredients in foods, and you also need to be trained on how to prepare healthy foods. We also need to learn more about healthy portion sizes. Broader cultural influences are "supersizing" our meals.

(5) Communication is another mechanism. I think a big piece of communication involves giving people feedback on how they're doing in terms of healthy living. I'm a big fan of setting group goals and having a dashboard that quickly relays information back to managers and teams.

(6) Another piece is relationship development. We found that when people form friendships as a result of their new healthy behavior, they are much more likely to stick with that behavior. So, we want people to form their teams and their friendships around healthy activities wherever possible.

(7) Traditions and symbols also play important roles in the culture. It is helpful to adjust traditions so they don't undermine health. So, for example, the way we celebrate should include healthy foods and activities. Ideally, businesses should establish one or two wellness traditions. Stretching before beginning assembly line work would be a good example of this. Participation in annual community walk/runs would be another example.

(8) Recruitment and selection is another key influence. Businesses need to get a reputation for being health-oriented. One strategy is to make prospective employees aware of all that is being done to support employee wellness.

(9) First impressions and orientation have a powerful influence. I like to have a member of the wellness committee to be among the first to greet a new employee. We often recommend that new employees engage in *Wellness Mentoring*. A first friendship could be formed around mutual support in achieving a wellness goal.

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(10) Another area is resource commitment. People need the wherewithal to carry forward with their healthy lifestyle goals. So, if there isn't a shower in the fitness facility or if there aren't safe places to exercise, it's going to be hard for people to exercise. With resources, we ask employees questions like: How can your employer show you they are committed to supporting healthy lifestyles? The answer sometimes surprises you. Sometimes it is an obvious thing, like "They need to give us a lunch break." Other times they simply want permission to go out and do some healthy activities.

So these are the general touch points—the social mechanisms. It's mostly a question of aligning these influences so they shape the norms that people pick.

Q3 How do you measure a company's culture?

JA: We use a multi-method approach. There's a quantitative instrument we developed; it's called a health-culture audit and it looks at the five dimensions I was just talking about. We ask people about their level of agreement with questions like: Are people rewarded and recognized for healthy lifestyle choices? Are people given the skills they need to achieve healthy lifestyle choices? We have about 40 questions that cover those five dimensions.

We also have protocols for focus interviews. The interview is a source of qualitative information. We'll ask employees how the culture is affecting their health. For example, we may determine that employees are not being rewarded and recognized for healthy lifestyle choices. We would then get their thoughts on the most effective way their employer could do that. Financial rewards are just one way; there are several other reward systems that could work as well or better. So, we want to make sure we get that qualitative input so we can do a proper analysis. The third measuring mechanism is field experiments. For example, there was a recent push for people to be better consumers of healthcare. We did some field experiments whereby our researchers followed recommended health consumer practices. For example, the researcher might ask: How much do medical services cost? What are your choices in terms of cost and benefit? Of course, we quickly found out that few health care providers were prepared for those questions. Such

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pricing information would be needed and the providers would need to be on board, if our recommendations for medical consumerism were to be successful.

A fourth measure has to do with seeing how wellness goals fit with broader social trends. Each state and community has its own cultural influence. Where I live in Vermont, for example, there is a lot of interest in purchasing foods that are produced locally. Environmental awareness is also very strong in Vermont. The wellness initiative would want to capitalize on these local or regional trends. It is important to assess the broader culture when designing a culture change initiative for a company.

Q4 Once measured, what are the next steps to systematically change the culture of an organization?

JA: I have a number of toolkits that I find useful for this. We have a wellness leadership toolkit that looks at the role of leaders at all levels, including the wellness champions, managers and executives. The toolkit essentially shows these leaders how they can support a culture of wellness. It also teaches leaders how they can share the wellness vision, serve as better role models, align touch points, and monitor and celebrate success.

We also have a peer support program called *Wellness Mentoring* or *Peer Coaching*. The idea behind this is to give employees an opportunity to help each other achieve lifestyle goals, and to increase the quality and quantity of peer support. We're pleased to say that in Brazil there are now over 2,000 companies using this approach. It's also popular in the United States. Union Pacific Railroad was among the first corporate setting to develop *Wellness Mentoring* more than 15 years ago.

Additionally, over the last two years I've been working on an initiative that trains people how to be wellness champions in their own households. We show them how to create a culture at home that supports wellness. The household culture plays a key role in whether people achieve wellness and many employers need to more effectively work with dependents as they are participants in the insurance plan.

These pieces combined seem to move the needle a little bit on the culture side. They're basic strategies that use culture as a mechanism for change versus more traditional wellness programs, which tend to look at individual motivation and education as a mechanism for change.

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Q5 When you think about the culture change process from end to end, in your experience, how long does that process usually take?

JA: I think for every new goal you have, it's reasonable to achieve that goal within a year. I think this timeframe allows for real change to happen.

Q6 How often should an organization assess the culture of their company?

JA: I have two thoughts on that. We have a system called a dashboard, and that's really an immediate feedback loop. It's more of a continuous process. I also think it's reasonable to do a culture survey once every year or once every other year. That should allow you to track your results.

Q7 What are the biggest mistakes that organizations make when attempting to create healthier cultures?

JA: Culture change does not happen just because you do a lot of wellness programming. I think that's the biggest mistake or misconception going on right now. There is this false belief that you can change and create a healthy culture by having everyone do a health risk appraisal, or by having everyone get a health coach, or by having everyone do your wellness programming. Most wellness programs are directed at individual change—they do not address group, organizational or community change—and I really don't think culture change works that way. I think the types of influences I was talking about earlier have to be hit more directly; you have to incorporate those touch points and the peer support. There's a lot more to culture change than just expanding your individual programming or offering team activities.

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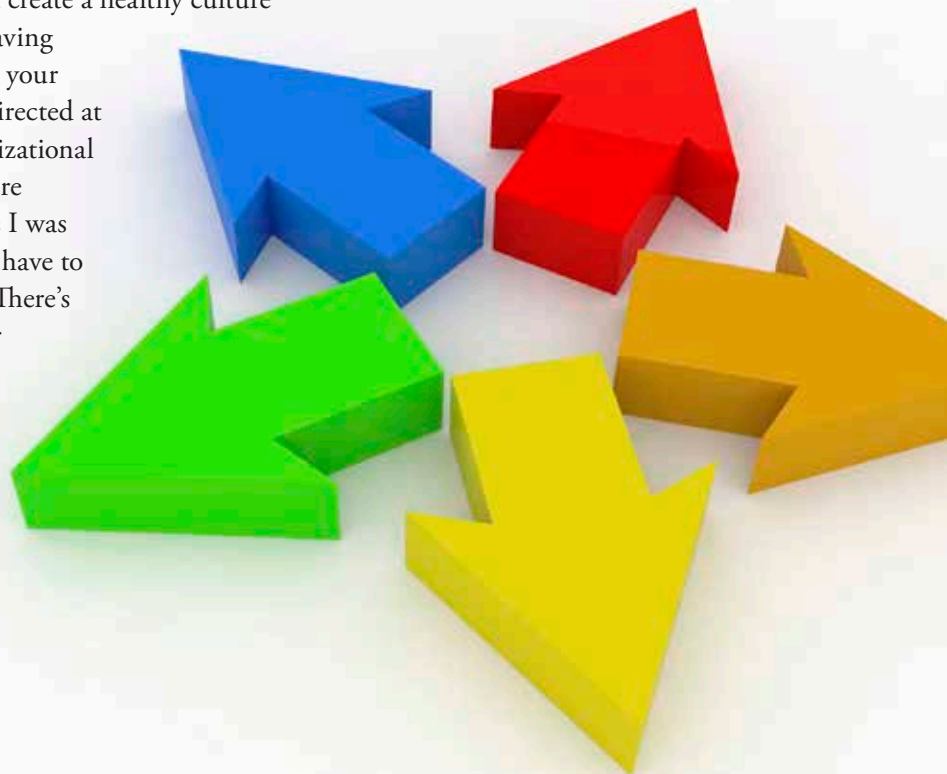
Q8 Can a company take on the task of creating a healthy culture internally or do they need an outside expert intervention?

JA: I certainly think a lot can be done internally, but I also know that an external perspective helps a lot. When we talk about wellness leadership or peer support or changing your household culture, I believe these things are best handled by the people who are going to be part of that new culture.

I have always taken the perspective that it's best to empower people to understand and change their own cultures rather than to impose that from an external source. It's just my philosophy. It has a lot to do with the idea of freedom—that you really want people to choose their cultures. That's the problem with the culture change approaches that were popular with organizational development consultants during the 1990s. During that time, culture became a buzzword, and it was mostly a mechanism for tricking employees into doing things their leaders wanted them to do. I think that that was short-lived mostly because people were resistant. People don't want to be tricked, but they don't mind changing the culture as long as they have a big say in how that works.

> "I have always taken the perspective that it's best to **empower people to understand and change their own cultures** rather than to impose that from an external source."

Q9 If you do a culture audit is it a good idea to share the results with the company as a whole and is it a good idea to share the results even if the results are less than desirable?

JA: I recognize the dilemma. We don't want to beat up on anyone about their initial results. Culture, particularly as it relates to wellness, has not been on the radar. We can't expect a supportive culture at the outset. We do need to give people good information so they can make progress. So I'm leaning towards full disclosure. Luckily, in the culture surveys that I do, most organizations have a number of strengths that emerge. I do believe that it's our strengths and not our weaknesses that help us move forward. I'm not interested in a report that only points out what's wrong and doesn't recognize the good things that are going on. I think our industry has been too focused on what's wrong with people, and we need to be more focused on what's right and building on those strengths. The whole concept of health risks, for example, is basically

a negative culture approach. We need to reframe the conversation to build on peoples' and organizations' strengths.

One nice thing about culture surveys is that they're mostly anonymous. You don't run into the HIPAA and other disclosure issues that you get with a lot of other wellness material. So you can give people detailed group feedback.

Q10 How much does it generally cost to assess the culture of an organization?

JA: I think that for a standard, very thoughtful cultural survey and analysis, we're looking somewhere between $2,000 and $5,000 and roughly $500 for sub-reports. Sub-reports are tailored to different worksites, if you have them.

I also want to add that I'm developing a legacy project. I'm training *Wellness Culture Coaches* and giving them the instruments and mechanisms to generate and share reports on their own. In addition, to being able to provide *Wellness Culture Surveys* and to conduct *Culture Interviews*, the coaches receive the knowledge and wherewithal to deliver online and classroom-style leadership, peer support and household wellness training. The cost of being trained to become a *Wellness Culture Coach* is $750. So it's something to consider. I'm at a point in my career and in my interests where I really want people to learn these skills and use these tools. Our *Wellness Culture Coaches* are a strong and growing network of independent wellness professionals that have added culture tools to their workplace and community wellness programs. Anyone interested in becoming a coach can find out more at www.wellnessculturecoaching.com.

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Q11 If you could provide some advice to wellness practitioners when it comes to assessing or changing organizational culture, what would you tell them? What would be the most important things you'd tell them?

JA: I think the most important piece is that most people are already attempting lifestyle changes. In most populations, about 80 percent of employees are attempting and plan to attempt a new lifestyle change. So, that means that people are well-motivated on a personal level. However, when we look at how successful they are—that story is pretty grim. Less than 20 percent of the general population seems to be successful in these changes.

We've seen that people can make changes for a short time, but not a long time if the culture is working against them. With willpower and personal motivation, employees can override the resistance within their environment for a week or a month or a couple of months, but eventually they seem to revert back to whatever the culture is demanding from them in terms of behavior. So, I think that's an important lesson for all of us in wellness. We need to understand that we have been successful in motivating lifestyle change, but we need to create a culture where the healthy choice becomes the easy choice, where the types of changes that we're interested in just become the way things are done.

It all really gets back to the question of: Why is culture so important? Dee Edington did some research and found that as long as people continue to adopt unhealthy practices, we're never going to have much success, at least economically, with wellness. So, the only way to really prevent people from adopting new, unhealthy behaviors is by changing the culture. They need a culture that doesn't promote high stress, overeating or being sedentary. I really think that culture is one of the untapped tools at our fingertips. **N&V**

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