

★WELCOA  
**Premier  
Provider  
Network**

An Expert Interview With



Extracon President, **Jesse Hercules**, defines culture and how to implement culture change in the workplace.



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# ★WELCOA Premier Provider Network

A PPN Expert Interview with



## ABOUT **JESSE HERCULES**



Jesse Hercules is the President of Extracon Science, a leading health promotion company using technology to bring engagement to wellness programs. Mr. Hercules has led the team at Extracon since 2007. Mr. Hercules is a frequent speaker and writer on health promotion topics, including two years of service on the HERO Think Tank for the Health Enhancement Research Organization.

Before entering the wellness field, Mr. Hercules held technology leadership positions at General Electric and at Waterstone Consulting. Mr. Hercules was educated at Northwestern University, earning a degree in Industrial Engineering with a second major in Economics. He then graduated summa cum laude from the University Of Mississippi School Of Law. He is a licensed Tennessee attorney, a licensed Patent and Trademark attorney, and a licensed multi-engine commercial airplane pilot. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

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## ABOUT **DR. DAVID HUNNICUTT**



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.

David Hunnicutt can be reached at [dhunnicutt@welcoa.org](mailto:dhunnicutt@welcoa.org).



**F**or more than 20 years, WELCOA has been dedicated to providing its members with the very best tools and resources to help them build and sustain results-oriented wellness programs. As part of this mission, we feature a network of Premier Providers to help familiarize health promotion practitioners with the increasing array of products and services available to them. In this Premier Provider Interview, Jesse Hercules, President of Extracon Science, defines culture and the steps that are necessary to implement effective culture change in the workplace.

The PPN Interview series is designed to give you a better understanding of each Premier Provider's background, philosophy, products and services. We hope that you find this resource useful in understanding how Extracon Science can best complement and help strengthen your employee wellness initiatives.



**Q1** How do you define the culture at a worksite?

**Jesse Hercules:** Our definition of culture is both simple and precise. *Culture is what we see others do.* If you look around the workplace and people are doing something every day, that means it's part of your culture. And that applies to everything from health, to safety, to dress codes, down to the way employees greet each other. If you don't see a behavior, it's not part of your culture. If people feel they have to hide a behavior, then it goes against the culture.

For example, how do we know the culture has changed around tobacco at work? 30 years ago, you would see employees smoking right at their desks. Now, you don't see tobacco use anywhere at the workplace. In fact, we hear about employees hiding tobacco use since it goes against the culture—for example keeping a tin of smokeless tobacco in their car out in the parking lot.

“Our definition of culture is both simple and precise. ***Culture is what we see others do.***”

—Jesse Hercules

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**Q2** It seems everyone is talking about culture these days—what separates your organization's approach from the others?

**JH:** Our approach flows directly from our definition of culture. When every employee can see their co-workers taking action to live a healthy lifestyle—and when they start taking action together—you have a powerful way to change the culture. So we focus on programs that make good health habits visible, and get employees to build healthy habits together with others at the workplace and at home.

We see a lot of culture-change efforts that consist of changing company policies (removing obstacles to healthy habits at work) and increasing accessibility of healthy choices. We think these efforts are a good start, but we don't think our job is done until employees start taking visible and measurable actions—together—to improve health.

**Q3** How does Extracon work with clients to change the culture?

**JH:** We often start with a culture survey or culture audit—and the one from WELCOA is excellent. Culture audits typically have three areas: company policies, access to healthy options, and how employees perceive the culture. In many cases, we can identify feasible ways to change policies and make the healthy choice the easy choice.

But we don't stop there! The next step is to roll out a set of Healthy Challenge programs that are social and team-oriented. Programs where employees invite each other to join teams, and start taking action together to walk more steps, eat more fruits and veggies, lose weight, choose water instead of sugary drinks, and take other visible actions to live a healthy lifestyle.

Participants can track their progress toward the program goals, and even choose to share and compare progress against their friends and teammates. Participants can post their successes to the News Feed and their Team Page and see what successes others are posting in their journey to good health. These kinds of programs produce great success stories that you can use to show your whole population how their peers are taking action to boost health. Programs like this make healthy habits visible—which is how you change the culture.

We see a lot of **culture-change efforts** that consist of changing company policies (**removing obstacles to healthy habits at work**) and increasing accessibility of healthy choices.”

—Jesse Hercules

**Are You On SWELL?**

SWELL is WELCOA's Social Networking Platform. Stay connected with other WELCOA members—Together, you will keep abreast of what's happening in workplace wellness.



Log in to connect with other WELCOA members: <http://swell.welcoa.org>

## Q4 Can you give us an example and case study of how you have helped your clients change their cultures for the better?

**JH:** One of our clients is a large, nationwide employer with about 8,000 associates. They had already completed a culture assessment and addressed their company policies and access to healthy options. They were looking for a way to push the culture change forward.

We worked with them to design a customized, 16-week program that addressed several areas of health: physical activity, fruits and veggies, choosing water as your drink, and maintaining a healthy weight. By the end of the program, most of the 1,800 participants were meeting the guidelines for physical activity, eating more fruits and veggies than before, drinking fewer sugar-sweetened beverages, and reporting that they feel better or have more energy because of the program. Many participants also lost weight—an average of 7.1 pounds each.

The participant surveys after the program made it clear that participants gained confidence that they can take action to improve their health, and that their employer and co-workers could help. And we're on track for an expanded set of programs this year!

## Q5 What are some signs that a culture is indeed changing for the better?

**JH:** There are things you'll see just walking around—and there are things you will measure on an annual basis. Both kinds of information are useful. The things you see just walking around are the same things your participants see, and that's important because culture is what we see others do.

So you should start seeing more people using the stairwells instead of the elevators. More people using the onsite fitness center, or doing laps around the block at lunch. If you have food available onsite or at meetings, you'll see healthier choices and portion sizes. You'll see more water containers on people's desks and fewer cans of sugary drinks.

You can see engagement in programs. For example, people wearing pedometers or wristbands that signify they're in a program. You'll have more people coming to you with questions about the wellness programs you're running. Does vacuuming the house count as exercise? Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable? You'll see lots of activity on the News Feed and Team Pages within your programs. And your Wellness Champions program should grow over time.

The participant surveys after the program made it clear that participants **gained confidence** that they can take action to **improve their health**, and that **their employer and co-workers could help.**”

—Jesse Hercules



Culture change is also something you can measure on an annual basis. We recommend revisiting the culture survey for a sample of your population, or including some of those questions in your health risk assessment. The numbers will show that more employees believe they can make a difference in their health, and that taking action to stay healthy is something their employer and coworkers will help them accomplish.

Your programs will produce data as well. How many Wellness Champions did you add? How many people participated in Team Challenge programs? How many visited the onsite fitness center? How many spouses joined programs?

## **Q6** What are the common mistakes you see in culture-change efforts?

**JH:** We see a lot of wellness programs that only include individual, private programs like HRAs, biometric screenings, health coaching, newsletters, and individual online programs. These programs may have good participation, measurable health risk reduction and pay out lots of incentive dollars, but we don't think they will help you change the culture.

Participants can't see each other do any of these individual, private programs. They can't do the programs together. They can't invite others to join them in the program. They can't communicate with each other within these programs. In many cases, spouses are not eligible to join the programs.

So we think it's very important to also have programs where participation is visible, participants can do the programs together and succeed together, participants have a chance to invite others and lead by example, and participants generate success stories you can share throughout the organization.

The second mistake we see in culture change efforts is that companies only work on the items named in the culture audit. Culture audits tend to focus on company policies and access to healthy options. You can't stop there—to change the culture you need participants actually taking measurable action on health in a visible and social way.

## **Q7** Is it possible that some cultures are never going to be changed?

**JH:** You bring up a good point. Health culture is just one aspect of the overall relationship between the employer and the employees. If the employees have lost their trust in the employer overall—then the health program is the last place where they're going to regain that trust.

Employees have to have some level of trust and good faith with the employer, and the HR/Benefits department, before employees will believe the employer cares about their health. So there are cases where that overall relationship has to be rebuilt before a culture of health can get started.

Culture audits tend to focus on **company policies and access to healthy options.**

You can't stop there—to change the culture you need **participants actually taking measurable action** on health in a **visible and social way.**"

—Jesse Hercules



## Q8 How long does it take to effectively change a culture for the better?

**JH:** It's not instant, but the good news is that you can get data and success stories all along the way.

The fastest way to start is by running a set of Team Challenge programs. Then, you can get company policies and access to healthy options improved on about a 1 year cycle. It will take at least 2 years to build up a good Wellness Champions program. But it's a 3 to 5 year process to build a strong culture. You have to show employees by sustained action that the change is going to last.

And this is similar to the timespan that corporations found in building a culture of safety, or re-orienting the company around quality, or other culture-change initiatives.

## Q9 Is culture change expensive?

**JH:** No more expensive than the other parts of your wellness program. For the same cost as other common programs like health coaching and biometric screenings, you can put a solid culture initiative in place. Culture programs can be cost-effective by using volunteers (like your wellness champions) and using wellness programs that are fun and engaging so they don't need heavy incentives.

And we believe that culture of health initiatives, like other wellness programs, can show a positive return on the dollars invested. Although some components of your program (like Wellness Champions) can't be directly tied to measurable health risk reduction; other elements like Challenge programs can show those kinds of numbers. And you'll likely see better participation and results in your existing programs once you start changing the culture.

## Q10 How should practitioners prepare themselves when they are about to undertake a culture change initiative?

**JH:** The first step is to assess where you are today. Look at your current program, and determine which parts of it are visible and social—and which ones are private and individual. Identify the base of support you have in place today—such as your wellness volunteers, wellness champions, and the leaders in HR, Benefits, or top-level executives who support the wellness program.

You can also conduct a preliminary culture assessment survey. Even a short survey will help you identify high-priority items to change, and help you pinpoint the obstacles you are most likely to face.

Culture programs can be **cost-effective** by using volunteers (like your wellness champions) and using wellness programs that are **fun and engaging so they don't need heavy incentives.**”

—Jesse Hercules



This is also a good time to look at your wellness calendar and determine how much time and budget you have available for a culture-change initiative. Is it something you can do this year, or does it have to wait for the next planning cycle.

**Q11** If you were to give the thousands of practitioners and business leaders who are reading this interview two or three of the most important practical piece of advice regarding changing culture what would you tell them?

**JH:** Culture is what we see others do—so your wellness program has to be visible to change the culture. Private, individual programs and incentives cannot change the culture in the same way as a set of team and social programs where participants work together to succeed.

Do everything you can to bring spouses into the wellness program as equal participants. Most health behaviors happen outside the workplace—and people are more likely to share a meal or a walk with a spouse than a co-worker. If we want to surround our participants with a positive culture, we have to think of all 168 hours of the week—not just the 40 hours they spend at work.

Build up your wellness champions program. Peer leaders have a lot of credibility in the workplace, above and beyond the messages that come from HR and Benefits. They can be the public face of your program in a way that changes culture. **PN**

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—Jesse Hercules

Find Out The 5 Great Reasons Why You & Your Employees Will Love The All-New Spark16 Healthletter!

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The logo for extracon science features a stylized yellow and green graphic of curved lines to the left of the word "extracon" in a large, lowercase, sans-serif font, with the word "science" in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font below it.

To learn more, check out their website at [extracon.com](http://extracon.com).







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