

The Challenge of Establishing a Wellness Group in the Public Service

Way back in April last year, I was reading the '*Barbados Business Catalyst*', a quarterly magazine of the Barbados Investment & Development Corporation (BIDC) issue Jan – March 2007, vol. 3 #1. Entitled '*Fit for the Challenge*', in which Wellness and Occupational Safety & Health were the main themes.

An article entitled 'Working Well: getting Employees in top shape', indicated that an ever increasing number of employers/firms are seeking to invest in Wellness in the workplace. Why?

Essentially because the workplace has become more sedentary, the workforce is becoming fatter, sicker and less productive due to chronic conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes.

Employee wellness programmes have long been advocated as a way to decrease healthcare cost, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity. These programmes are designed to maintain or improve employee health before problems arise, and are essentially made up of three components i.e. health Screenings, health and wellness educational programmes, and fitness programmes.

The Barbados Business Catalyst highlights the Nation Publishing company's attempt at developing a wellness culture in the Barbadian context. While we in the public service do not have a *formalised* structure that supports wellness programmes there is no reason why we can not come together to promote wellness. We can seek to support such an initiative within structures that already exist such as Sports and Social Clubs, through Work Improvement Teams, or even look at our Human Resource Departments in a whole new light. Which ever course we choose, one of the good things about the Public Service is that it has an abundance of qualified health care professionals within its ranks.

So armed with the above article in mind the executive of the Ministry of the Civil Service Social Club set up a Wellness committee to examine what could be undertaken at our workplace to improve productivity, morale, lower stress levels and improve overall wellbeing. The committee at its inaugural meeting sought to examine the following:

1. Establishment of a walking / hiking group.
2. Explore the possibility of a corporate membership in an established Gym.
3. Establishment of a 'weight watchers' style support group for persons who were overweight / underweight.
4. Seek to investigate public service options in respect to medical insurance schemes.
5. Seek to provide a forum for professionals in the health sector to advise and educate members of staff on critical health issues such as stress and time management, lifestyle changes and other issues which speak to our mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

6. Seek to utilize and harness the staffs own knowledge in respect to healthy diets, healthy recipes and healthy formulas that have worked for them and their families.
7. Seek to establish regular health screenings.

Step One in our Programme – Getting Physical

One of the first tasks and perhaps the easiest was to organise a walking group. We saw an open window of opportunity during the school summer vacation, when staff who were part time students and those who were parents were able to take advantage of a six week walking programme. The programme was initially for six weeks three day a week. Three persons with plenty of gym experience were selected from the staff to conduct the warm-up and cool down sessions in the car park at 4:45 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Outcomes

1. Initially the walkers walked as one group just to get everyone ‘physical’ however, as the walking progressed on a weekly basis three groups emerged. Group 1. were the pace setters, these were persons that were physically active (participated in some sporting activity) or those who already made walking part of their lifestyle. The majority of this group were in their late 20s early 30’s. Group 2. were persons that were reasonably fit and could maintain a fairly good pace. This group was the largest and consisted of mostly females of various ages. Group 3 walkers consisted of persons that were physically inactive. Of this Group, three persons had one or more of the CNCD or had a physical impairment. The walking group consisted of about 17 persons, but on average during the six week period numbers varied between 12 and 9. After the six week period about 6 persons continued to walk three days a week. Of the six walkers it was ironic that 4 are from group 1 (the pace setters) and the other two are from group 3 of which one has a CNCD.
2. Almost from the very beginning all the walkers benefited from clarity of mind. Almost everyone stated that they were better able to concentrate at work. Some said they felt calmer, others less stressed and still others said that the walking aided in a good nights rest.
3. While the Ministry of the Civil Service (MCS) and the Office of Public Sector Reform (OPSR) are both housed in the same building and headed by the same Permanent Secretary one could not say that there was a close relationship between the two, however since the establishment of the Social Club some barriers have started to slip. Yet one of the most significant barrier breakers was the participation of staff from both agencies in the walking

programme. As the walking progressed it was uncanny how each group had a combination of walkers from each organisation even if the groups consisted of two persons. This pairing of minds, abilities and skills have lead to greater camaraderie, and a deeper appreciation and respect of what both organisations are seeking to achieve.

Step two – Making Healthy Choices

The second step on our road to wellness was the formation of a weight watchers / healthy choices / healthy living group. With the kind assistance of the National Nutrition Centre we were supported in this project by professional Community Nutritionist, who introduced the group to:

- Nutrition and weight management
- Giving general information in respect to food values
- Debunking myths and misconceptions in ‘fad diets’
- The role of fat in the diet – good fats and bad fats
- The Importance of Physical Activity and Health
- Portion size and understanding Food labels
- Carbohydrates and the Glycemic Index
- Understanding the metabolic rate as we age
- Essentially highlighting that what we eat is really a choice, at no time did any of the nutritionist say ‘don’t eat this or that.’

Outcomes

1. By the end of the six week period, group members had a better understanding of how they could make adjustments to their and their families’ diets and lifestyle
2. For those members of the group that were suffering with CNCD was able to understand the role diet plays in stabilizing there condition.
3. In the introductory session all members of the Weight watchers / Healthy lifestyle group BMI and body fat percentages were calculated. Most members sought to set reasonable and realistic goals to improve their condition in the long term.

The second tasks of the committee was to survey the staff to determine if (1) they were interested in medical insurance or medical discount cards, and (2) what were their priority areas of concern in respect to health information.

Step three – General Health Education

The staff were given a list of health areas for discussion and asked to rate them in order of priority. With assistance from the nursing staff of the Winston Scott Polyclinic the Barbados Registered Nurses Association and the Network Services Centre monthly lectures have been organised on such topics as Stress Management, Hypertension / Stroke and Heart Disease, the causes and management of Diabetes, Prostate Cancer,

testicular and breast cancer, menopause, and cervical cancer.

The first lecture in this health education series was “Stress Management,” presented by trusted psychologist and counsellor Anderson Kellman from Network Services Inc. staff found this session to be timely and relevant and were pleased with the practical tips on how to handle stress in the workplace. (For more on stress in the workplace see page 6)

As the new year opens with new expectations, and new challenges one of the biggest challenges for the wellness committee will be the sustainability of its wellness programme.