

what's working

recipe for team success



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by | **Robbie Hartman, CEBS**

When employers start cooking up wellness activities and health initiatives, many employees envision having to follow a strict diet or adhere to a regimented schedule of exercise—or both. The very thought of following these orders, in turn, can lead some employees to lose their appetite for making healthy changes.

Instead, the Manitoba Nurses Union (MNU) chose a different recipe for success: Follow the smell of yummy goodness.

In 2017, MNU used homemade soup as part of a wider effort to entice employees into incorporating healthy activities into their lives.

“Our soup day began as an initiative of the Manitoba Nurses Union Wellness Committee,” said Monica Girouard, director of operations for MNU. “We wanted to have a fun, healthy activity for our staff.”

From January through April 2017—prime time for warm soup to counteract the cold weather—staff members would volunteer to bring healthy soups to the office to share. “We wanted to have four volunteers bring different soups. The first time it was the committee members; after that, staff members volunteered,” Girouard said. “The soup was provided, and people were encouraged to bring their own sandwich or bun.”

The simplicity of the idea can mean high levels of participation and low levels of difficulty as far as initial implementation. It also can boost a social component of a wellness program in addition to the nutrition and physical health aspects.

“Just like I love to cook for my own family at home, the opportunity to cook for my work family once in a while and provide them with a healthy lunch makes me feel great!” said MNU Wellness Committee member Marise Frankel.

“Soup day was a simple initiative that was very popular, and people enjoyed the team-building aspect as well as the food,” Girouard added. “Having the four soups was great for our staff, and our staff size of about 35 lent itself to the activity since we were able to have lunch together in our staff room.”

Part of a Healthy Mix

Much like a sandwich, salad or bun can be a nice accompaniment for soup, a soup day activity can serve as a complement to a larger set of wellness activities.

Girouard noted that, in addition to soup days, at various points throughout the year MNU offered stair challenges, walk-at-lunch challenges, a staff golf day, and healthy breakfasts featuring muffins, homemade granola, yogurt and fruit brought by members of the MNU Wellness Committee.

“We also presented ‘Wellness Wednesdays,’ where we circulated by e-mail healthy recipes and reminders to stretch,” she said.

These once-in-a-while initiatives help to keep a wellness program fresh and contribute to an overall culture of health. But measuring the success of these types of smaller activities may involve employers looking beyond the metrics of big data.

“People really enjoyed the activities, and there was a sense of improved camaraderie. But we really had no metrics to measure health change,” Girouard said. “The goal was to raise awareness of health and have fun.”

By itself, a soup day likely isn’t a sustainable practice for a year-round health initiative for small employers. It is challenging for volunteers to find the time and resources to regularly provide soups, Girouard noted. But soup days proved to

be a valuable addition to overall efforts to improve wellness and bring the team together. The benefits even extended outside of the workplace.

“I like that the soup day involves not only our co-workers but our families as well, either shopping for or preparing the soup,” said MNU Wellness Committee member Linda Stoyko. “It helped with healthy eating all around—at home and at work.”

Key Lessons

The smaller staff size of MNU brought both advantages and challenges. On the positive side, initiatives like soup day can sprout quickly and organically, allowing staff to eat together and build camaraderie.

The MNU Wellness Committee communicated soup day to employees through e-mail and word of mouth. With a staff of around 35 people, word of mouth could spread the word quickly—and, perhaps most importantly, get the soup to the mouth.

“I like the buildup to the actual day—the excitement of the staff, the endless inquiries as to what we are making,” said MNU Wellness Committee member Marija Tisaj. “It’s a great feeling.”

On the flip side, MNU found it difficult for staff members to be as involved as they would like or find the time to volunteer as often as it would take to keep the initiative going all year.

“It’s been a bit of a challenge to keep it going,” Girouard noted. “We have found that people’s schedules don’t permit them to volunteer as much as they’d like.”

Research from the International Foundation report *A Closer Look: 2018 Workplace Wellness Trends* showed a link between successful wellness initiatives and support from leadership. Budgets specifically devoted to wellness programs also increased the odds of success. The experience of MNU seems to reinforce those findings. Soup day

started successfully with the efforts and participation of committee leadership but, as Girouard noted, extra resources would be needed to keep it going at the desired level.

“It’s a volunteer committee with no formal budget,” Girouard said. “To start it again, we would need some organizational funds.”

Ultimately, however, soup day helped to bring colleagues together to enjoy a healthy meal in a fun, social setting. In another sign of its success, Girouard noted that MNU staff have been asking for the committee to reactivate soup day, and committee members are feeling reenergized to create new events—showing that the hunger for healthy activities is still going strong.



From left to right: Monica Girouard, Marise Frankel, Linda Stoyko and Marija Tisaj.

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