

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue # 18: Participatory Teams of Workers Can Strengthen and Broaden the Scope of Health Promotion Programs

Contributed by Marian Flum Sc. D., University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA

It is common for workplace health promotion programs to rely on an in-house health promotion “champion” to initiate, recruit participants for, and implement programs. An enthusiastic and energetic champion can be effective in getting employees involved and keeping them engaged. However, if that individual leaves or is no longer able to act in a champion role, activities can cease or continuity can be lost. Establishing a committee or “design team” of non-supervisory workers can enhance the program by contributing other ideas to improve employee health and to recruit participants. In addition, the committee members can help to provide program continuity should the champion be replaced or leave the workplace.

With the support of CPH-NEW researchers, participatory Health and Wellness teams (HWTs) have been operating at three nursing homes in Massachusetts for two or more years. Their goal is to create a healthier work environment for employees, and to contribute to improving the health of co-workers. (A similar team has been developed at a Connecticut Department of Corrections facility, also under CPH-NEW auspices.) In the nursing homes, the committees consist of 4-10 employees, from a variety of jobs, and meet 1-2 times per month. Committee functions include:

- Identifying issues of importance
- Prioritizing issues
- Identifying activities to address priority issues
- Planning activities
- Developing proposals to management for activities.
- Recruiting participants
- Evaluating activities for future planning and improvement

Issues that were identified as high-priority at one or more nursing homes include the need to:

- Improve availability of healthy food at the workplace
- Have space and time to exercise on site
- Reduce stress (e.g., provide a quiet place to relax)
- Improve teamwork
- Improve communication

At all three centers, the HWTs worked to improve the quality of food in vending machines to include yogurt, salads, soups, fresh fruit, sandwich wraps. One center has made salads and sandwiches available to employees at nominal cost through its dining services as a result of HWT activity. More typical health promotion activities have included yoga classes, walking programs, “Biggest Loser” programs, healthy snacks with recipe cards, free chair massages for all employees, and smoking cessation education.

Less traditional projects have included:

- An employee-run garden to provide fresh vegetables to employees
- Redesign of an employee break room to create a comfortable, relaxing environment
- Proposal to sponsor a Farmers market for employees and residents with fresh fruits and vegetables, donated local entertainment
- Purchase of picnic tables to provide a quiet outdoor retreat
- Proposals to improve communication at shift change and when residents change rooms
- Installation of an employee-monitored suggestion box

Team Training

Training is important for team members to enable them to be effective, through acquiring new skills and new content knowledge. Team-building activities can include exercises to establish the purpose and scope of the team, practice in identifying and prioritizing issues, development of simple proposals to sell an idea to management, and assigning responsibilities among members. Discussions of outreach and recruitment methods help members see themselves as representing the entire workplace, putting their own personal health needs into the larger context. Learning to communicate with co-workers and management is also necessary to build an effective program. As the team develops its list of issues and priorities, areas for needed content training can be identified in parallel.

A proposal to management should be brief and to the point. A simple list of points to cover can be useful as a proposal template and can be included in a team training exercise. It should include the following:

1. Project description
2. Need for project
3. Benefits of project
4. Description of how the project will be carried out – time frame, duration, responsibilities.
5. Costs
6. Information, support, etc. needed from management.
7. Contact Person

The proposal template can also include a line for manager sign-off, to facilitate communicating the decision to others whose cooperation may be needed. Management interaction with the team - reviewing proposals, encouraging their efforts, and reacting quickly when possible to allow rapid initiation of their ideas - can help build a confident, effective team and program.

Evaluation

Learning to evaluate activities - identifying successes and mistakes for future improvement – is critical. If an activity failed to attract participants, was it because the activity was planned poorly,,or do co-workers not share the team members' priorities? This kind of evaluation can reduce the probability that a "failure" will lead to defeatism or cynicism. Developing a standard method for reviewing the outcomes, including ways of getting more people interested, reaching out to others to learn why they didn't participate, and summarizing why an activity was a success, can help the team become stronger, so that they can be more effective in the future.

Marian Flum, CPH-NEW Qualitative Research Director at University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA

Recommended references: Delp, L. Outman-Kramer, M. Schurman, S. Wong, K. Teaching for Change: Popular Education and the Labor Movement, UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, LA 2002.

Recommended Readings: Tobiason, L. Increase the Effectiveness of Your Health and Safety Committee. University of Nebraska – Lincoln: <http://ehs.unl.edu/committees>.



CPH-NEW is a Center for Excellence to Promote a Healthier Workforce of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. CPH-News & Views is a semi-monthly column written by Center researchers on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces. These comments reflect thoughts of the individual researchers and do not represent conclusive research summaries, nor do they necessarily reflect a consensus among all Center personnel.

We welcome your responses and discussion. Please send all questions and comments to CPHNEW@uml.edu.