A corporate culture that values health and well-being makes people feel good about themselves and improves their productivity. If a corporation approaches its employee population with open respect and sheds past attitudes of paternalism, it empowers all concerned to achieve a win-win balance.

As American business corporations recognize that they can have high impact on their employees in ways other than financial, and as insurance costs continue to skyrocket, smoking-cessation programs conducted in the workplace are a natural choice. In this way, businesses need no longer bear the heavy price of medical repair when a combination of individual employee responsibility and some corporate resources can prevent the most costly consequences of one of the nation’s biggest killers.

The Workplace

Over the years, numerous and various workplace attempts have been made to help employees quit smoking. The reasons for these programs are well documented and include lower rates of illness, mortality, absenteeism, and health-insurance-benefits usage. Clearly, smoking-cessation programs make economic sense. However, on a more idealistic level, some forward-looking corporations choose to make societal contributions by offering programs such as these, which have a potential of affecting the employee on the emotional, social, and spiritual levels, above and beyond cost savings. It is true that major corporate cultural shifts occur only when both economic need and popular support coexist; let us not undervalue the willingness of upper management to respect and respond to the needs of the employee population.

The workplace is a powerful force in today’s society. With both men and women working in such great numbers, this facet of our societal life has grown in impact. People spend a large portion of their lives at work. Before, business was dominated and populated by men while women...
demonstrated their value at home and with the family, but today, the workplace is shared with women in ever-increasing numbers. As a result, business continues to affect men, and it grows in its influence on women and the family.

People identify themselves a great deal with how they make money. Typically, the question asked after meeting someone for the first time is, “How are you?” The second question is, “What do you do?” To varying degrees, workplace culture often provides identity, defines values, and suggests behavioral norms for its participants. The way we dress, the value we place on rigidly following the rules or being innovative, and, by extension, the degree to which we are health-conscious at home are subtly, sometimes unconsciously, determined by our collective mentality called “culture.” Using the power of the corporate culture to minimize smoking behavior is a very useful beginning to a successful smoking-cessation program.  

Changing the Culture

Changing the culture occurs in several ways at several levels. The motivation to change is in place; smoking cessation makes economic sense, and on some level and for some personal reason, virtually all smokers know that they want to quit.

Structurally, the work organization begins by limiting and ultimately eliminating the number of locations where smoking can occur. Insurance-benefits contributions by the employee are lowered for nonsmokers. Funds and resources are released for wellness programs and facilitates and, specifically, for smoking-cessation programs.

As with all culture shifts, gaining the support of upper management is immeasurably useful. Releasing funds is one thing; getting management smokers to participate in the program and to enforce smoking regulations in the boardroom and with their important customers, is often another.

Probably, the single most significant factor in successful culture change is a thorough, constant, relentless, but varied bombardment of messages repeated to employees, signaling that a healthy lifestyle is in their own best interest. This positively based message probably begins as a general encouragement toward health and is backed up by specialized programs in areas including physical fitness, nutrition, stress management, meditation, cardiac stress testing, weight management, cholesterol testing, parenting, avoidance of alcohol and other drug abuse, and many, many others. Complements to these programs are cancer-detection methods, caretaking of elderly parents, and, of course, smoking cessation.

This wellness culture may take years to accomplish, but recent public media have given us some help. The key here is to get employees talking about and thinking about health in its various forms. Even employees who