

Time to Go Beyond Safety Training?



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Gachina Landscape's Wellness Program educates employees on healthier choices

Gachina Landscape Management

Founded: 1988

Headquarters: Menlo Park, Calif.

Founder and President: John Gachina

Markets: San Francisco Bay area

Services: Environmental Stewardship, landscape management, landscape enhancements, and water management & irrigation

Employees: 320 peak season

Website: www.gachina.com

When a couple of his employees pitched the idea of a company-wide health program, John Gachina went for it all the way. Gachina Landscape Management in Menlo Park, Calif., was already a thriving company that provided health insurance to employees, but the idea made sense to him in a number of ways.

"Healthy employees are happy employees," says Gachina, who started his own company in 1988 after years of experience in the landscaping and golf course industries. He says that because of industry-wide budget issues, employees' health is often overlooked by landscape company owners, and that can have an adverse effect on the bottom line. His company provides health insurance, and instituted the suggested health program because good health can make a company more efficient as well as keep morale high.



Getting employees to engage in stretching exercises before work was difficult at first, but eventually employees bought into the healthy practice.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GACHINA LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT.

Employee retention has always been important to the company; Gachina has some employees who have been with him for more than 20 years. When employees see that the company isn't just about the bottom line, and actually cares, they tend to hang around longer. Those are valuable employees, and the cost of hiring and training new workers can be a drain.

Gachina also noticed that many Silicon Valley high-tech firms in the area used health care resources as a hiring and retention factor. Although he can't match their budgets, he can match their efforts, he says.

What is now called the Wellness Program officially started in 2008, "But the company always had a culture of wellness," says Brisa Zamudio, human resources administrator for Gachina Landscape Maintenance. "It was almost an organic process" to carry a commitment to wellness over into an active drive for general employee health.

Zamudio oversees the program, coordinating with Human Resources Director Denise Ritch. The pair came up with the idea, according to Gachina, who has just provided his enthusiastic support. The company's goal is to create a healthy and safe work environment, but at the same time try to connect employees to personal lifestyles that will encourage them to take healthy living home with them and get their families involved as well.

One of the most visible examples of how the company tries to guide employees toward good health practices is in the company's central office in Menlo Park. Zamudio says that the first efforts in the program consisted of getting office workers to eat healthier foods and to exercise regularly. One of the first practices was to set up the training room as an exercise center during lunch hours.

"We have yoga classes; group pilates," Zamudio says. "We do that every Friday at lunch hour."

Jumping jacks anyone?

She says that six to eight of the office's 15 workers participate regularly in these types of exercise programs, which tend to be on the aerobic side. Other office workers, also encouraged by the program, may walk or jog outdoors during lunch hour. Some have even begun an exercise program that takes place every workday.



Field workers generally get plenty of exercise, but they have been encouraged to engage in a stretching program prior to beginning the workday. This is designed to reduce muscle strain and is part of the company's accident prevention program as well. Stretching is done in the company yard before the workers set out on their first assignments, or done on the job site.

"It's a great way to start the morning," says Gachina, who takes part when he's in the field. Different employees at each site lead the exercises, on a rotating basis, to make sure everybody gets involved. He admits that not all employees embraced the program – not at first anyway – but the company keeps

reminding them that it can reduce muscle strain. It also keeps workers in the mode of thinking about their health and safety on a daily basis.

Company employees are also invited every year to participate in a breast cancer walk sponsored by a local fundraiser. A company team promotes the walk well ahead of time, and besides the exercise, employees can raise money for breast cancer research. At the last walk, they raised \$700. Another purpose was also in the minds of company organizers.

"Our employees are primarily Hispanic, and Hispanic women are often not early-detected for breast cancer," Ritch notes. By promoting early screening and exercise to employees, their families also become aware of methods of reducing the dangers of breast cancer.



When employees suggested that his company start a wellness program, John Gachina's support made it flower.

Food choice is a big part of health in a country where sugar and fat are almost everywhere, and company management has made a concerted effort to change unhealthy eating habits, at least on the job. In the past, Ritch says, office meetings often were fueled by donuts. Now employees substitute bagels or granola and fruit for the fatty foods, trying to encourage healthy habits at all times, and the branch office is joining in. The company even invited its health insurance provider, Kaiser Permanente, to come in and demonstrate how to cook a healthy, vegetable-rich meal.

One example of the focus on lowering sugar consumption is the company's "soda challenge." Beginning in 2009, employees were challenged to not drink soda for a year. While it may not have been totally successful, it raised consciousness of what dietary elements are being consumed and encouraged workers to drink fewer sugar-rich liquids. Ritch says she used to drink at least one soda a day, and now she is down to about one every month.

Another company function, the annual picnic, also came under scrutiny once the Wellness Program went into effect. For one thing, sodas were no longer served, giving way to more healthy drink choices. And the picnic became a good platform to provide information to company employees about all aspects of healthy living. Competitive walking, group fun runs and a soccer tournament are now also part of the picnic, all of which fit into the exercise component of the program.

"We're trying to make the picnic a wellness picnic," says Zamudio, who emphasizes that getting to know employees' families and having wives and children encounter healthy living information is an important part of the rationale.

The company also now has an annual health fair devoted to the same thing. All employees are invited to attend, with the company providing some of the cost and resources. Health care partners such as Kaiser Permanente provide blood pressure testing and strength tests, and the Santa Clara County Health Department also has proven to be a great partner and resource for

information.

Worth the expense

Ritch points out that there are many resources out there that can reduce the cost of such a program to an employer and reach out to families. Gachina says the cost of the Wellness Program is minimal; Ritch says the health fair costs the company about \$200, with other expenses folding into the costs of events such as the picnic.



The annual company picnic now features exercises and foods that are part of the Wellness Program, with a fun run getting employees' kids involved.

At the same time, the Wellness Program ties in closely with the company's existing safety program, which shares some of the same goals. Ritch says the company has a safety officer who promotes workplace safety primarily through weekly tailgate meetings, but it also has a safety investigation committee that examines how an accident happens with the goal of preventing it from happening again.

Safety is the job of every employee, she says, and that's the culture that's being created at Gachina Landscape Management. From enforcement of the policy to wearing personal protective gear to the vetting of company drivers to make sure they have good driving records, the company is committed to safety. It even has a "return-to-work program" that allows injured workers to take on easier jobs and ease back into work earlier while recovering.

The tailgate safety meetings are also recorded on video in order to record attendance. The company wants all field personnel to attend. Follow-up is at times necessary to enforce the rules, Ritch says. The company tried an incentive program in 2002 and 2003 to promote safety, but it was not deemed effective. Now it's stressed that good safety practices are simply a part of the everyday job.

The company also provides health insurance for employees, a long-standing commitment. There are three different insurance options, ranging from a basic HMO to the more expensive PPO, which allows the employee to choose his own doctors. Employee contributions are at levels they choose.

"Again, it's about retention," Gachina says of health insurance for a company that has 320 employees in the peak season and does over \$20 million in sales. The company focus is on commercial landscape management and enhancement, with about 70 percent of business in contracted maintenance. It is expensive to keep hiring new employees when dissatisfied ones leave, and he figures the cost of retention into his cost of doing business. Part of that is the health of themselves and their families.

"My employees are hard-working family people, and they have the same concerns and worries that you and I do," says Gachina.

It's also all about creating a culture of health-minded employees and keeping morale high. He supported the plan that Zamudio and Ritch came up with

because it made sense when talking about the overall health of the company itself. When workers see that the company cares, they also care. He says the financial returns are so far not measurable in a financial sense, but it is an investment in his people, he feels, and the company makes a profit at the same time.

“What do successful companies do?” Gachina asks rhetorically. “We can model or steal some ideas that fit our cost structure.” The result is a company Wellness Program that draws on existing resources, costs very little up front, and creates a culture of efficiency and caring that carries over into all aspects of its landscaping business. What’s not to like about that?

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