

Should HR encourage exercise at work?

'When people are mentally strong, they are entirely more likely to be engaged and perform at their best'



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The link between the strength of our mind and the standard of our performance is irrefutable, according to Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo.

Gately added prioritising consistent exercise to have a healthy body and mind is essential for peak work performance.

“When people are mentally strong, they are entirely more likely to be engaged and perform at their best,” she said.

Indeed, co-authors Robert J. Anderson and William A. Adams surveyed more than one million leaders worldwide for the research in their book, *Scaling Leadership: Building Organizational Capability and Capacity to Create Outcomes that Matter Most*.

They found that exceptional leaders exercised on a regular basis and commented afterward as to how important this was to help them in their leadership role.

In particular, they found that the days that they did not exercise were the days that they were less effective. They also learnt that the days they were having a tough day at work were the days to increase their exercise.

The daily exercise was not just about being fit and healthy, it was about improving mood and cognitive ability as it accentuates their ability to think.

According to Gately, in an ideal world, people would prioritise their own physical and mental health.

Ideally, they would forge the time for exercise in their day. However, the reality is a lot of people struggle to find balance in their life, especially if they are in a demanding job that involves long hours.

“Most of us understand the struggles of maintaining an exercise regime despite the endless benefits for our mind, body, spirit and success,” said Gately.

“Creating the opportunity for people to exercise in the workplace, or on work time, can go a long way toward helping them find the motivation and discipline they need to incorporate exercise into their life.

“As an HR professional, the most important role you can play is to encourage managers to see why investing in the physical and mental health of their team benefits not only the individual but also the organisation.”

According to Gately, the key benefits worth focusing on when convincing your leaders and organisation to invest in wellbeing programs include these:

Exercise is energising and helps people to choose a better attitude

Reflect on the benefits you have felt from going out for a walk, run or gym class during work hours. Just getting outside for short burst of exercise can make a big difference to our ability to clear our mind, release tension and reenergise our spirit.

An exercise session in the workplace might just be what people need to recharge and get back to working at a productive level. Thanks to the release of endorphins, exercise provides a natural boost to our mood and a more energised outlook.

Regular exercise has been proven to reduce stress and ward off anxiety and depression

With 20% of the workforce battling mental illness at any given point in time, it makes sense to invest in preventative measures. While certainly not the whole antidote, experts have long recognised the benefits of exercise when it comes to letting go of stress and ultimately avoiding or overcoming mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression.

Even moderate exercise such as a brisk walk, short weights session at the gym or yoga class in the boardroom can do wonders to help people on your team let go of the tensions that have been building throughout the week or day.

Exercise improves cognitive function

Studies show our decision-making and problem-solving abilities improve after exercise. Research led by the University of Manchester, found exercise is good for boosting brainpower.

The study, including close to half a million people, found “there is a clear connection between muscular strength and brain health.” Logical problem solving, visual stimuli reaction time, spatial skills and recalling instructions were all enhanced by muscle strength.

Lead author Dr Joseph Firth, an honorary research fellow at The University of Manchester and research fellow at Western Sydney University, said: 'When taking multiple factors into account such as age, gender, bodyweight and education, our study confirms that people who are stronger do indeed tend to have better functioning brains.'

Investing in health and well-being lifts engagement

Most people appreciate the benefits that come from a corporate health program. While not everyone will get on board and leverage the opportunity, the majority will at least recognise the generosity of the offer.

When people believe their employer cares about them, they are more likely to be loyal and do the right thing. When they believe their employer has a generous spirit and is willing to invest in them, they are more likely to give in return.

With a healthier body and stronger mind, those who do turn up regularly to workplace exercise classes, are those most likely to thrive at work and in life.