

Healthy Leaders Build Healthy Companies

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Over many decades, the definition of health and how we think about it has evolved for the better. Originally viewed as the absence of disease, the most useful definitions of health today are comprehensive and go well beyond traditional thinking. Health includes physical health, emotional health, cognitive capacity and, surprisingly to some, a sense of purpose.

Studies show that healthy companies that prioritize and adhere to today's broader definition of health keep employees engaged, productive and on-the-job and win the war for talent. And today, worker retention is critical. More than 75% of a typical company's value is in intangible assets including its people, and much of that value can simply walk out the door.

It's time we recognize two realities: 1) healthy leaders build healthy companies, and 2) health is a company's biggest strategic asset.

So, there's significant impetus for today's top executives to aspire to become healthy leaders. But that message and motivation can get lost in the day-to-day noise of running a company, leading a division or being part of a busy senior executive team.

Health Is Holistic

When leaders and leadership teams are ready to become healthy (or healthier), it's worthwhile digging deeper into what that truly entails:

- Physical health means more than living comfortably in your body and performing daily tasks. It's about building endurance, strength, and the ability to recover. It is about reducing the chances of illness and disability, and includes eating better, sleeping more and staying on top of health assessments.
- Emotional health refers to the ability to cope with positive and negative emotions, and reduce stress and anxiety.
- Cognitive capacity includes a leader's ability to think and learn, and improve memory, concentration and problem-solving.

Finally, sense of purpose refers to the energy unleashed by aligning personal values with priorities. This provides motivation, determination, and endurance. It helps leaders meet goals and find reservoirs of strength they may not know they had.

While executives can perform well for periods without mastering healthy habits, they cannot perform to their full potential or without a steep cost over time to themselves, their families, and the corporations for which they work.

A leader's journey to health is unique, and very much their own. But in broad strokes, leaders will need to assess their health, resolve to improve their performance and role model their gains to their employees to help embed health into the individual, workplace and overall corporate culture.

Train Like an Athlete

So, how do you become a healthy leader? Rigor is required. So is compassion, for yourself and others. The choices you make, and model require daily commitment, refinement, and improvement. The path to health won't be linear. Celebrate accomplishments and acknowledge but don't dwell on setbacks along the way.

In my work with senior executives, we often talk about bringing their A game. For executives to perform at the highest levels over many years, they need to train in the same systematic way that professional athletes do. This helps leaders deal effectively with stress, become more resilient, and improve daily.

While many consider stress an enemy, it actually plays a crucial role in growth and performance. Leaders are often surprised to learn that stress is not their problem, but lack of recovery time is. Chronic stress, without taking time to recover, depletes energy, leads to burnout and exhaustion, and undermines performance. While athletes often have lengthy off-seasons and recovery time between games and competitions, executives are in the trenches daily.

So, when we say train like an athlete, we are not just talking about training with purpose, commitment and intelligence. We are also talking about taking the time to recover, and to let your mind and body recuperate and repair. This helps embed new mindsets and behaviors to sustain healthy changes for the long term and build resilience.

5 Tips to Jump-Start Your Health Journey

While the path to healthy leadership, executive teams and companies can seem long and steep, there are simple steps you can take to start training like an athlete and begin role modelling health to your teams:

- Fuel your body. Eat and drink well. Prioritize healthful foods like fruits and vegetables. Consume a balanced diet and stay hydrated.
- Build in rest and recovery. This includes breaks, sleep and intentional recovery. You may not need an 'off-season', but you will require pauses to enable repair, build strength and resilience, and ultimately help you to move faster.
- Know your data. Monitor and trace your baseline health metrics, to course correct and make necessary adjustments along the way.
- Focus on the process, not just the end result. This provides positive feedback and inspiration at every step of the journey. If you follow and celebrate process milestones, you will end up in the right place.
- Surround yourself with trusted experts. The journey to health often deviates. There will be ups and downs, peaks and valleys. Expert medical, coaching and consulting support can help you (and your colleagues) throughout the journey.

Becoming healthy in the holistic sense takes time, commitment and resources. But prioritizing individual health and the health of your company is worth the investment.

At a macro level, we can all unlock years of higher-quality life and create meaningful economic value. At a micro level, we will feel better and be able to build resilient, productive teams and cultivate a more competitive company.