

# Organizational Wellness

An interview with World-Renowned Heart Surgeon Dr. Dwight Lundell

## How does employee health affect your productivity and bottom line?

You might think Corporate Wellness is a ‘buzz word.’ You might think it’s a ‘trend.’ Or you might think that’s just some kind of ‘new fancy overhead cost designed by human resources.’ You might even think that Corporate Wellness is the last thing that should receive budget allocation—especially during these tough economic times. But, you might want to think again.

“The statistics are frightening, terrifying, and outright difficult to digest,” says Dr. Dwight Lundell, co-author of *The Cure for Heart Disease: Truth Will Save a Nation*. “Today, almost 50% of all Americans live with a chronic disease. And, any leader in every company should be wondering how that number affects their business.”

Without a doubt, Dr. Lundell is right. Healthcare costs (Or “illcare costs” as Lundell calls them.) to all organizations are enormous. Blame it on government. Blame it on the health care institution. Blame it on anything you want. But, realize that no matter who gets the blame, the overhead costs associated with ill-employees is far greater than you might imagine—health insurance and benefit plans have huge price tags, sick-leave is accountable for enormous production losses, and chronic illnesses can be detrimental to morale.

“I’ve seen the devastation,” says Lundell, a heart surgeon for more than 25 years. “One chronic illness can destroy an entire company.”

Throughout his career Dr. Lundell performed more than 5,000 open-heart procedures. He’s treated people from every walk of life—and from all career levels inside corporate America. Heart disease isn’t an elderly disease, it’s not a socioeconomic disease, and it’s not an illness that any company claim immunity. In fact, the onset of heart disease is on the rise culturally—affecting more people today than ever before in history.

The big question is; how do we measure the impact that any disease is having on our company’s productivity and bottom line?

The Milken Institute for example recently estimated the economic burden of chronic disease to be approximately \$1.3 trillion a year, with medical expenditures accounting for \$277 billion and health-related productivity loss accounting for nearly four times that amount at \$1.1 trillion. Those are scary numbers—and still seemingly impossible to compare to your company’s health or wellness care expenses. Nevertheless, Dr. Lundell offers a few considerations to understand relationship between health and productivity inside your organization.

### 1. Monitor Illness-Related Absenteeism

“Count and compare the sick days,” says Lundell. “Illness related absenteeism is defined as not being physically present at work due to any physical or mental health issue. That sounds easy to measure, but it’s not so clear-cut. With the current Human Resource trend of classifying all time away from work into one category ‘Paid Time Off’, most employers are not tracking a distinction between absences.”

Of course, productivity loss due to health-related absences is much greater than the cost of lost wages—replacement costs, temporary workers, overtime for coworkers, or a reduction in quantity or quality is also difficult to measure.

“If your company is 10-years-old or older, you may see a striking difference between sick-leave,” says Dr. Lundell. “Chronic illnesses are reaching into younger generations. Obesity and diabetes are now common. And the statistics are getting worse. I know it’s hard for managers to take on the responsibility of worrying about their employee’s health concerns, but it will become a necessity.”

## **2. Monitor Illness-Related Presenteeism**

“What happens to productivity when a chronically ill person drags that illness to work every day?” asks Lundell. “The opposite of ill and absent is ill and present. Illness-Related Presenteeism is a reduction in an employee’s performance when an employee shows up for work when he or she is not healthy. Most of us have ‘muscled-through’ an illness at work. And, we’d be kidding ourselves to claim that it didn’t cause a reduction in the quality, quantity, or timeliness of our work. Any illness can make any person perform at less than 100%. And, those illnesses can create safety consequences, morale consequences or all sorts of complications. Presenteeism is more difficult to measure and validate than absenteeism because it is not always observable. This is where your people skills and management skills are necessary. Ask people how they’re feeling. Of course you don’t want to be missing a day of productivity from someone feeling less than perfect, but missing a day is far less expensive than missing an entire year or a career.”

## **3. Monitor Risk Factors**

“People move your business forward,” says Dr. Lundell. “A study in The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine revealed that as the number of an employee’s health risks increases, employee’s productivity decreases. I’m not suggesting that a company weed employees because of their health risks. Instead, I’m suggesting that companies try to help employees decrease or eliminate those risks. Offer incentives for employees to quit smoking. Do what is possible to reduce stress in your workplace. Healthy and happy employees produce more.”

## **4. Show You Care**

“This may sound elementary,” says Dr. Lundell. “Showing your employees that you care about their health and wellbeing—by offering wellness programs, or simply by showing concern—will open up dialog that can be invaluable to understanding the impact that health has on your organization’s bottom line. Get

people talking. If employees don't fear sharing their health concerns, morale will rise, and so will their engagement and commitment in your company. Instead of saying, 'I don't know if anyone is sick unless they tell me,' take responsibility and say, 'I don't know about any employee's health unless I ask them.' All the business books now are saying that companies who create a culture of candor will perform better. Health is personal. It's not always easy to talk about. But, it's impossible to measure unless we can all have open dialogue."

Once you have measured the affects health has on your bottom line, what do you do?

"Share health and wellness information," says Dr. Lundell. "Better yet, get your company enrolled in a corporate wellness program. And, make health part of your corporate culture. The companies who are already enrolled in programs are raving about it. And, I know it's at the forefront of discussion inside boardrooms because I get asked all the time to speak to employee audiences about heart disease and weight loss. Companies who take control now will be far ahead of their competitors. The bottom line is that it truly pays to be healthy."

#### About Dr. Dwight Lundell

Dr. Lundell's experience in Cardiovascular & Thoracic Surgery over the last 25 years includes certification by the American Board of Surgery, the American Board of Thoracic Surgery, and the Society of Thoracic Surgeons. Dr. Lundell was a pioneer in "Off-Pump" heart surgery reducing surgical complications and recovery times. He's in the Beating Heart Hall of Fame and has been listed in Phoenix Magazine's Top Doctors at least 5 times. In his career, Dr. Lundell has performed more than 5,000 open-heart surgeries. He lives in Paradise Valley Arizona, is the Founder of The Healthy Humans Foundation ([www.healthyhumansfoundation.org](http://www.healthyhumansfoundation.org)), and he competes in triathlons in his spare time.

For more information about the book *The Cure for Heart Disease* go to:  
[www.thecureforheartdisease.net](http://www.thecureforheartdisease.net)