When employees of the International Foundation tell friends about the workday’s bocce or cribbage game or an upcoming Brewers outing, tailgate party before the coed softball team’s game or healthy recipe competition, a common response is: “Can I get a job there?”

It’s not all fun and games. Anyone who attends the Annual Employee Benefits Conference or any of the dozens of other programs or takes advantage of e-learning courses, personalized research, Foundation publications or the website realizes that plenty of work gets done. Keeping 33,000 U.S. and Canadian members up to date on employee benefits can be downright stressful.

That’s the reason for the bocce and cribbage leagues, a nature path through a beautiful wooded campus, a memorial garden, the softball team, community service opportunities and frequent events and outings that draw co-workers together.

Many of those activities are direct results of an all-staff survey and focus groups that in 2011 identified stress as a problem. The workplace environment had room for improvement. Staff felt overworked and thought communication with leadership could be better and supervision more consistent. Some co-workers seldom got to know co-workers in other departments, even with a relatively small staff of 140.

Two years later, a followup survey showed that the Foundation—which has always had topnotch benefits and enjoyed low staff turnover—had become a healthier workplace. By 2013, morale had improved and a significantly higher percentage of the staff said they would recommend the Foundation as a great place to work. Communication, leadership/management, collaboration, HR support, work/life balance and staff recognition also had improved.

How Did We Get There?

Leadership made a healthy workplace culture a priority. The small but dedicated Work ‘n’ Well Committee that for years had organized an annual walking program was expanded and rebranded the Healthy Workplace Council with a beefed-up budget. The newly energized council was charged with providing programs and initiatives that encourage all employees to get involved with the organization and their communities in new ways. It sends regular all-staff e-mails and reports at staff meetings.

As they plan activities, the 11 members of the council focus on all five aspects of well-being that are measured by the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index—physical, social, community, financial and purpose. (Nationwide, only 7% of employees thrive in all five areas—But that 7% file fewer claims and have better health, greater adaptability to change and less turnover.) Here’s how Gallup describes these elements and what the Foundation is doing:

Physical: “Having Good Health and Enough Energy to Get Things Done Daily”

A target of most wellness programs is physical inactivity. It’s no different at the Foundation. Breaks are encouraged, including walks through the beautiful, wooded campus. Yoga and pilates classes are offered on site several weeks each year. More than half the staff participates in the formal walking program, which some years has awarded points for walking laps on site only but this year was...
broadened to include all forms of exercise. Other initiatives have included:

- Healthy foods on site at a nominal cost. Council members shop each week for fruit, vegetables, yogurt, granola, etc. Blenders were purchased for making smoothies. Soda prices were raised 50¢ to help subsidize healthier options.
- Organized group runs—5Ks, Warrior Dash, etc.
- Lunch-n-learns on walking, nutrition and other health topics
- On-site health risk assessment/biometric screening—sometimes with participation incentives
- Healthy environment—a nature trail, memorial garden and no-smoking policy
- On-site flu shots, mental health coverage and case management.

Social: “Having Supportive Relationships”

“The difference between wellness and illness is the WE!” is not just a corny wellness saying—it’s backed by lots of research. Leadership strongly believes that strong social relationships are as good for health, longevity and productivity as good triglycerides. Among the Foundation’s successful social strategies are:

- The Honey Badgers coed softball team is in its third year; every Wednesday (game days) throughout the summer, all staff members are invited to dress casually in team gear at work and support their team at games.
- A front-lawn bocce ball league between two-person teams (with names like Boccelicious, Total Debocker, and Mac and Bocheese—the 2013 winners who celebrated by cooking mac and cheese for the entire staff). The teams competing on the broad front lawn of the Brookfield, Wisconsin headquarters over the noon hour often include members of the Foundation’s leadership.
- A lunchroom cribbage league in the winter. (A number of staffers have learned the game so they can join the fun.)
- Staff outings like an annual golf tournament, a Brewers game, tours, state park hikes, painting, theater, bowling, ping-pong, gardening, jewelry-making and holiday parties (often including retirees and families)
- Fun work dress-up days—Dress as you would in retirement, ‘80s day and ugly sweater day.
- Common on-site events/celebrations—wedding/baby showers, healthy food cook-offs, bake sales, department parties/potlucks.

Community: “Liking Where We Live, Feeling Safe and Having Pride in the Community”

Research shows that the more people invest in others, the happier they are, and that community volunteering leads to higher life satisfaction, greater mental health and longevity. Scientists have determined that generosity can improve levels of cortisol, a hormone linked to stress and a variety of health problems.

A Family Fund team for decades has sponsored chili cook-offs, staff Christmas cookie sales and popcorn sales to raise money for holiday gifts and school supplies for low-income families. Both the Family Fund team and Healthy Workplace Council increasingly offer opportunities for employees to support surrounding communities via charitable giving and volunteering such as:

- Volunteer projects: painting rooms at shelters for homeless women and children, building homes with Habitat for Humanity and helping at the Humane Society
• Food drive competitions
• On-site blood donations five times a year.

Financial: “Managing Finances to Reduce Stress and Increase Security”

While research shows extravagant salaries and benefits are not as important as engagement for improving employee well-being, poor salaries and benefits can cause employee stress and hinder engagement and culture. Foundation leaders, realizing a healthy culture would be difficult to grow amid a financially stressed workforce, have made a point of ensuring basic needs are met and employees can enjoy a sense of financial security. The Foundation:

• Conducts periodic market scans of area and industry employer wages and benefits. Changes are occasionally made to ensure we remain at or above market in most job classifications.
• Offers generous defined benefit and defined contribution retirement plans. A remarkable 97% of employees participate in the 401(k) plan.
• Provides on-site financial education (both from objective financial experts and from 401(k) and 403(b) providers). Staff also are encouraged to earn the CEBS designation, with materials and tests provided for free and a bonus for doing so—providing an invaluable knowledge base for retirement planning.

Purpose: “Liking What We Do and Being Motivated to Achieve Our Goals”

Employees who derive meaning from their work are more than three times as likely to stay with their organizations and 1.4 times more engaged. Some forward-thinking companies have gone as far as to design policies that allow a portion of the workweek to be used for pet projects of employees’ choosing.

The Foundation has taken steps to grow a sense of purpose and fulfillment among employees. Performance reviews now directly tie eight evaluation measures to the mission of the organization, with two of those factors—initiative and resourcefulness—related to purpose/autonomy. Three other performance measures—communication, team-oriented and positive/helpful—also support improving the workplace culture.

Other ways the Foundation supports employee purpose include:
• Job openings are e-mailed to all staff, and interested qualified candidates are encouraged to apply. The Foundation often promotes from within, and lateral transfers are common and encouraged when employees see an internal opportunity that better fits their interests.
• Teams, committees and councils provide collaboration and leadership opportunities outside the traditional job hierarchy.
• Personal development and continuing education opportunities, as well as tuition reimbursement
• New recognition policies: performance pay, service recognition and retirement celebrations.

In May, one-on-one well-being coaching became available through the employee assistance program (EAP). The Healthy Workplace Council is exploring the possibility of an on-site fitness center and/or gym reimbursements and discussing how to incorporate more of the mental, psychological and emotional aspects of health into programming. That may include leveraging the existing EAP with stress management activities, mindfulness meditation and resiliency training.

Council members sometimes talk about the Foundation’s self-funded health care costs and return on investment of the wellness program, but they view the wellness offerings as a benefit for employees and an investment in the Foundation’s future. They know there is no successful one-size-fits-all model of workplace wellness, and most efforts are based on and judged by staff feedback.

They hope the next all-staff survey shows things are even better here.

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