You’re the Boss: 2 Business Strategies You Can Use to Improve Your Health Habits

By Steve Mardon

Have you ever imagined yourself as the head of a large company, with the power to introduce or improve a product that changes millions of lives? Even if you never end up managing hundreds of employees or running a manufacturing plant, you’re nonetheless chief executive of one very important person -- you! And just like the head of a company, you can use savvy business principles to improve performance.

Two ideas from the business world -- continuous improvement and SMART goals -- lend themselves well to the health arena. Here’s how you can use them to change vital habits such as making healthier eating choices and getting more exercise and sleep.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is simply the idea of always focusing on progress. (Or, as the Beatles sang: “getting better all the time.”) In the business world, this typically means improving a product, a service, or a process. But you can also apply the concept to your own health habits.

The nice thing about continuous improvement is you don’t need to make a big change all at once -- instead, the key is making small steps in the right direction. Over time, small steps turn into major strides.

For example, say you drink 2 sodas a day, or 14 sodas a week. While it would be best to cut out all soda immediately, any reduction is still an important improvement, and should lead to gradual weight loss and better health.

So you might start by alternating days of having 2 sodas with days of having 1. That would cut weekly soda consumption from 14 to 10 or 11. After a week of that, you can work toward getting it down to 1 a day (7 per week). In this fashion, you can keep working on reducing the number per week -- perhaps either to zero or to where you have half a soda on occasion as a treat.

Use continuous improvement for any less than healthy area of your food choices, such as donuts, candy bars, visits to fast food restaurants, etc.

You can also apply this approach to increasing how often you eat healthy foods. If you hardly ever eat any vegetables, start by making sure you have 1 serving a day, every day. Once you’ve got that down for a week, work on adding a second vegetable serving each day.
Continuous improvement also is well-suited to exercise. If you currently get little or no daily exercise, start with a modest goal, such as running (or even walking) half a mile around your neighborhood or the high school track (2 laps). Once you can do that, make a point of going another tenth of a mile each day. This slight improvement, which isn't likely to be overly taxing on your body, offers two benefits. First, just doing it means you didn’t skip the day, and you more than matched your previous day’s result. Second, you can feel good knowing that if you keep adding a tenth each day, in short order you’ll be able to do a mile, and then a mile-and-a-half, etc.

Again, you can apply this strategy to any area of exercise, such as spending 1 more minute on the elliptical machine at the gym, doing 1 more push-up, or adding more weight to your bench press. You can decide how often you want to up the ante -- every day, every few days, or each week.

Sleep is another opportunity for continuous improvement -- you might aim to go to bed 2 minutes earlier each night for a week.

What health-related area in your life can you take a continuous improvement approach to?

**SMART Goals**

The second strategy, setting SMART goals, is a tool for creating goals you’re likely to achieve, rather than goals that tend to fade away. The idea, introduced in the 1980s, was initially used by managers to help employees do their jobs better and achieve their career goals. The concept can be applied to any type of goal, including health-related ones.

So what is a SMART goal? SMART is an acronym to remind you to set a goal that maps out exactly what you need to do. The goal needs to have these five qualities:

- **S**pecific: Pick a specific goal (typically something involving a number).
- **M**easurable: Have a way to measure it, either with a device or by counting in your head.
- **A**ttainable: Choose something realistic.
- **R**elevant: The goal should be tied in to your overall goal (better health).
- **T**ime-bound: Assign a specific time frame.

Here are examples of how to convert an ordinary goal into a SMART goal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinary Goal</th>
<th>SMART Goal</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To lose weight.</td>
<td>To lose 4 pounds this month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get in shape.</td>
<td>To get 6,000 steps a day this week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To drink more water.</td>
<td>To drink at least 7 glasses of water every day from now on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get more sleep.</td>
<td>To go to bed by 10:30 p.m. at least 5 nights a week.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To reduce stress. To meditate twice a week this month.

Once you complete your first SMART goal, you can set a new one with different details. Can you come up with one?

**Getting Down to Business**

I recognize that changing your health habits is harder than these examples may make it sound. You still need to do the hard work needed to make improvements and reach your goals, which takes time, effort and persistence. But using these two strategies puts you in a better position to make the important changes that lead to weight loss and better health.

Steve lives in New Orleans and has been an Omada health coach since March 2015. He has written for newspapers, newsletters, and magazines and is the co-author of books about sleep and sinusitis.