

WELCOA's News & Views

A Unique Perspective On

Culture Change From The Inside Out

An Expert Interview with
Culture Change Expert, Judd Allen



ABOUT JUDD ALLEN, PhD



Judd Allen PhD is president of the Human Resources Institute, LLC—research, publishing and consulting firms that focus on the creation of supportive cultural environments, and empower people to better understand and shape their cultures. The work of the Human Resources Institute, LLC is founded on a basic premise that groups, organizations and communities are much more likely to achieve their health and productivity goals when supportive cultures are created. Judd Allen earned his PhD in community psychology from New York University. Dr. Allen serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Health Promotion, and is also a member of the board of directors of the National Wellness Institute. He has authored more than 50 journal articles, training manuals and software titles, and many books including *Wellness Leadership: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthier and More Productive Employees*. Dr. Allen has also served on the faculties of New York University, Cornell University Medical College, Johnson State College and Nebraska Methodist College, and is a regular speaker at national and regional conferences.

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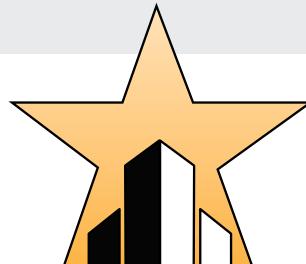
An Expert Interview with
Judd Allen

ABOUT DAVID HUNNICUTT



Since his arrival at WELCOA in 1995, David Hunnicutt has interviewed hundreds of the most influential business and health leaders in America. Known for his ability to make complex issues easier to understand, David has a proven track record of asking the right questions and getting straight answers. As a result of his efforts, David's expert interviews have been widely-published and read by workplace wellness practitioners across the country.

David Hunnicutt can be reached at dhunnicutt@welcoa.org.



When it comes to workplace wellness programs, unsupportive cultures are the biggest impediment to individual and organizational success.

In this exclusive interview, Dr. Judd Allen shares his expertise on wellness cultures, and offers salient advice for creating healthy environments. He discusses the critical ways in which your company can promote peer culture that is a positive step toward meeting your wellness goals. To help you improve your company's support of its wellness programs, Dr. Allen offers guidance on how to create new norms and alter social and cultural environments that support your wellness initiatives.

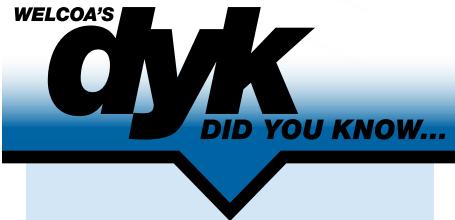
With the foundation of a healthy, supportive culture, your workplace wellness programs will thrive—producing results for your company's bottom-line and drastically improving employee health.



David Hunnicutt: From your perspective and from the research that you've been doing, what is culture exactly?

Judd Allen: Well, the term culture comes from the word to cultivate and it's a farming concept. For me, the idea is to create good earth where the seeds of healthy living and wellness can take root. There are five dimensions of culture that I tend to look at:

1. **SHARED VALUES.** These are priorities within an organization. For example, an organization might say, "We want to make health or the health of our employees among the top priorities at the company."
2. **NORMS.** And that has to do with whether healthy behavior is expected and accepted within a group.
3. **TOUCH POINTS.** These are both formal and informal policies and procedures such as rewards and modeling and training.
4. **PEER SUPPORT.** This is the help that people give each other to achieve healthy lifestyles.
5. **CLIMATE.** This has to do with whether people get along and are inspired by what the organization is about. We look at three climate factors: a sense of community, a shared vision and a positive outlook.



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DH: How do you measure culture?

JA: We have a culture survey; it's called a Wellness Culture Survey and it operationalizes those five different dimensions of culture. So it asks questions like what extent is supporting healthy lifestyles a priority in your organization? Or it will ask employees if they feel like they are being rewarded and recognized for healthy lifestyle choices. There are about 20 items on that survey and it's a five point strongly agree/disagree type of scale. So we get a quantified measure of the different dimensions of culture.

The second form of cultural measurement that we use is focus interviews. We ask employees about their perceptions of why it was that people are not seeing the rewards and recognition for healthy lifestyles. But more importantly, we get employee input on what the best strategies would be for addressing those areas that were identified in the culture survey as needing change.

The third mechanism that we use for looking at culture is observation and I guess you would call it field experiments. For example, we might take a new employee and have them practice the desired behavior—say taking a lunch break, and see what happens. We have them report back on the resistance or support they received for the behavior that we're looking at. Those three different strategies are deployed to create a picture of the culture.

DH: When you get your results back or when someone takes a look at what their culture looks like – how do you go about changing shared values or priorities?

JA: Well first of all, health and support for wellness does not have to be the top or only priority at a company. I think there's often this belief that if you don't elevate your goal to be the top goal, that it's not going to have value in the culture. We want health and wellness to be among the top priorities, along with being productive or innovating or customer service or even profit—but it doesn't have to be at the very top or the only priority.

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And then, one of the important considerations is the value proposition. We want people to understand that wellness delivers a variety of benefits. Wellness of course offers economic benefits—the cost savings on health care. And of course there are the health benefits—living longer or the benefit of having a better influence on family members. There are also organizational benefits like creating stronger teams or better relationships within the company. We want to make sure that we don't undersell our product by only focusing on one benefit. We want to offer a full value proposition.

DH: How would you go about changing norms?

JA: Well, norms are fairly difficult to change. And so, I think one important idea is to really concentrate on just one or two norms at a time. When it comes to changing norms we use touch points. We have identified and defined 10 touch points that help shape that norm—to help it take root. For example, one touch point is rewards and recognition. Sometimes that means not rewarding the unhealthy behavior. For example, we have tended to reward people who work through lunch, however, if our norm goal is to get people out and walking during lunch, then we've got to stop rewarding people for working through lunch.

Another touch point encompasses modeling. It's critical to have some role models who've achieved this goal and who can show the benefit of that behavior. Another area is communication. Particularly in giving people good feedback on how they're doing with a healthy behavior or how the group is doing in achieving a healthy behavior.

It's important to note that not all 10 touch points are needed to change a norm. We reveal all 10 to organizations we're helping, and help them align enough of them so they can create what we call a tipping point. So, it kind of reaches that critical threshold where the touch points are shaping behavior in a consistent way and establishing that norm.

The two general ideas are that you really need to focus on just one or two norms at a time and then you need to align enough of these touch points to set up that new norm.

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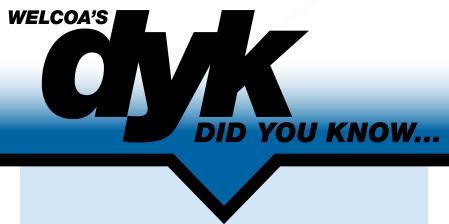


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DH: How do you address and achieve peer support for wellness?

JA: Well there are two aspects of peer support: quantity and quality. So, quantity can be addressed by having buddy programs and just making wellness activities more social. And the quality area focuses on training people how to help each other. I don't think the current culture provides adequate training; it seems like listening and nagging are the two dominant skills in the natural available culture.

I wrote a book called *Healthy Habits – Helpful Friends* and the general idea is that there are six skills that you can learn to help create a healthy culture and help individuals establish healthy habits:

1. Help people set a goal.
2. Help people find a role model
3. Help people eliminate barriers
4. Help people find a supportive environment..
5. Help people work through setbacks.
6. Help people celebrate success.

Additionally, one nice thing about peer support is that it can happen in nearly any worksite because it just takes two people. It can often happen off of work time. People can schedule their get together over lunch or after or before work. And it's something where people can work with friends that they're likely to get support from for many years. So it's not as time limited as traditional wellness programs are.

DH: How do you address cultural climate?

JA: There are three climate dimensions. One, is there a sense of community? So we could for example rethink our wellness offering so that they build trust, and so they give people an opportunity to help each other. So it gives people a chance to get to know each other better. In this dimension it could just be a reformulation of traditional wellness offerings.

The second dimension of climate is shared vision. What we're looking to do here is remind people that their work is important and is a key to the success of the organization. I'm truly amazed at how many have become so disenchanted or have just lost touch with their work and their purpose. I think that realignment, revisiting the organizational vision is important. And wellness programs could affirm that vision. And so that's a key piece.

The third piece has to do with a positive outlook, and I don't think wellness has a great track record here. Historically, we have looked at health risks, and really that meant looking at what's wrong with people. And so part of developing a positive outlook is reframing that. Maybe instead we can look at people's strengths, look at their support system's strengths and look at what's working and see if we can build on that. We're finding that it's our strengths—not our weaknesses—that help us move forward. And so maybe that old school view of risk and what's wrong with people is not as helpful as we thought. We probably need to regroup around more of this positive outlook or positive culture perspective.

DH: When you think about the role of leadership in creating a wellness culture, how important is that?

JA: It's very key, but I want to broaden the perspective of leaders. First, I think we need to look at the executive group and the functions they serve. I think they do three essential things. One is that they set the agenda for what the focus of the wellness initiative is going to be. Secondly, they should hire or decide who is going to be responsible for carrying that agenda forward. And then third, they often have the say-so on the resources for the wellness initiatives. So, the executive group can carry out those functions and that's very important.

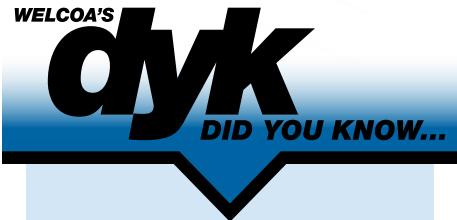
However, I'm also very interested in the role of middle managers in supporting wellness. I think there are four functions that we want them to help with:

1. **SHARING THE VISION.** Why is wellness so important for this organization? Why are they personally inspired by this idea?
2. **SERVING AS ROLE MODELS.** This means participating in the wellness initiative and adopting healthier lifestyles.
3. **ALIGNING THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL TOUCH POINTS.** Middle managers can really help shape the policy and are often the gate keepers for whether formal policies even go into effect at a local level. We need to have them work with those touch points.
4. **MONITORING AND CELEBRATING SUCCESS THAT IS ACHIEVED IN THEIR WORK GROUPS.** I think that historically the measurement has only happened at a high aggregate level—so there might be a report for the whole company. I think we need to develop a dashboard for middle managers so that they can set goals and celebrate what's achieved at a local level. There will be more ownership of that information if it's organized in that way.

DH: What are the primary cultures that influence an individual's wellness?

JA: I believe there are four different domains which contribute to an individual's wellness:

1. The worksite culture
2. Peers and friends
3. The household and family
4. The community



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DH: How do you begin thinking addressing household and family cultures?

JA: First off, I think it's key that we have a very inclusive definition of what household and family is. The days of "Father Knows Best" where you have a man and his wife and two kids are really over. It's over because our demographics are changing. We are aging as a population and there just aren't kids in a lot of households. So we can't really design a program where family is only talked about as a kid's program. We really need to rethink what that is and include people who are gay and straight and every type of configuration.

And then, I think we need to invite people from home to participate in worksite wellness initiatives. I think that is increasingly obvious. I think a lot of employers have been reluctant to say "Well you can invite your family or household to participate." But I think that's a mistake. I think that we are already paying for the health coverage for those people so it makes sense to invite them. And I think it's equally true that employees won't be able to make changes unless they get involvement from their family and household.

Finally, I think we can offer training to employees about how to create a wellness culture at home. There is an environment at home that has all the manifestations of a culture, with norms and peer support and values. And it's impossible to help an employee lead a healthy lifestyle if they don't know how to do it at home.

DH: When you think about addressing culture at the community level, what does that entail?

JA: Well, I think that communities, just like households and workplaces, have cultures. And so, the same principles that I described in changing norms, happen at the community level. Communities have norms. For example, in New York City people now know it's a norm to walk, even if it's 10 blocks or more. I do think that we can create a wellness culture at the community level. Whether it's creating a database of community resources and changing the way that a community celebrates its special occasions so that it has more of a wellness aspect. These are all ways that you would change community culture.

DH: Is there such a thing as a toxic culture?

JA: I definitely think there is. One of the more common examples is at organizations that have had layoffs. Organizations that have bad management practices also seem to create a toxic culture in which people have really gotten to hate each other. And it's very toxic, it's hard to imagine anyone leaving there intact.

The evidence is quite compelling that much more could be achieved with people creating a supportive culture. 

DH: What can employees do if they find themselves in a toxic culture?

JA: Well, first of all I think it's possible to create a peer culture. That would be a group of friends who are not going along with the bad stuff, and are finding ways to support each other in resisting whatever bad things are going on in the broader environment. I've seen some work groups pull together and do some great things, even in very unhealthy organizations. I was just working with a hospital system this past week, and several of the work groups did the biggest loser contest and really got a big kick out of that. And this is in an organization that really doesn't have a wellness initiative. So, it was amazing to see what can spring up among work groups.

And of course, another strategy is to know that you can always leave. It's not really a good idea to spend a life or even a year in an environment where people are very unhealthy and unsupportive. And I think that some people make the mistake of sticking it out in a situation that's not going to improve. And so I think that that's another strategy. Find a better place.

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DH: You've been doing this for over 30 years—what's the biggest challenge you face in creating wellness cultures?

JA: Well, for me, the biggest challenge is that there is a preoccupation with the individual. We live in a highly individualistic society, and even though the evidence is quite compelling that much more could be achieved with people creating a supportive culture, the predominant work that is going on is directed at helping one individual change by themselves. I think this is just a challenge within our culture. For some reason, we think that things that people do by themselves are somehow better or more stable than things that people do together. This makes my work twice as hard because people can't see the value or how it would work to create a supportive culture. They almost view it as some sort of human flaw that people would need each other to achieve and support healthy lifestyles.

I also think there is an over emphasis in our society on motivation rather than support. I think the traditional American view is that if people really wanted to be healthy—they would be. And so those people who are unhealthy just must not want it enough. That's not what I've found. I think I've found that most people, even who've gone through a heart attack, are trying desperately to achieve these wellness goals, but can't. Because we haven't created the type of support we need to help them be successful.



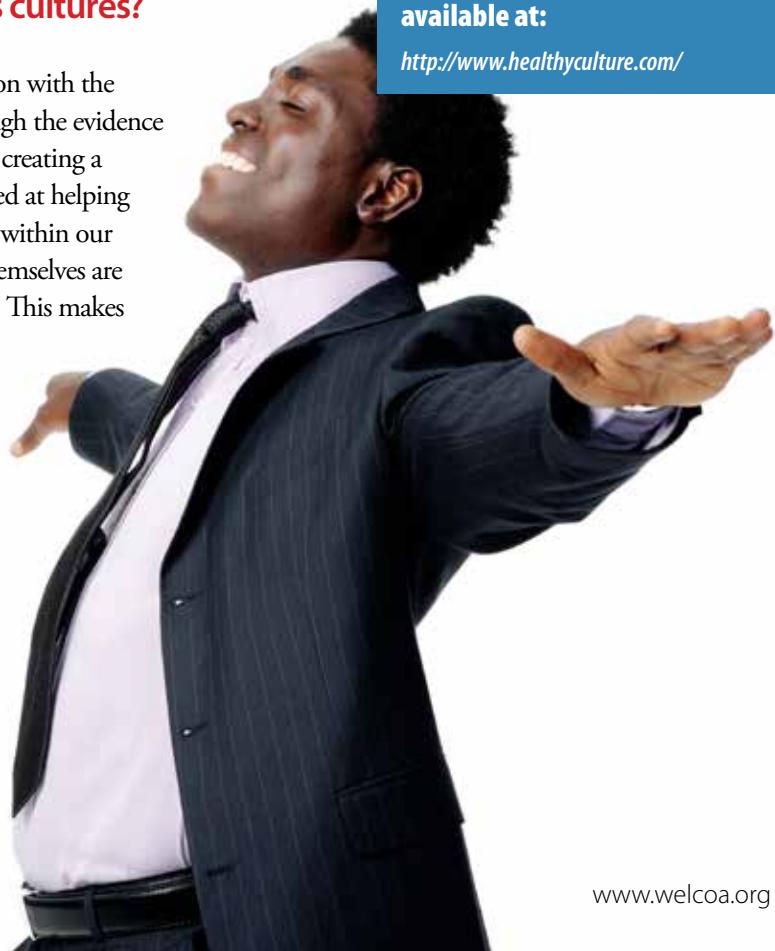
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Notable & Quotable

Judd Allen speaks out on...

Priorities

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Changing "The Norm"

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Leadership From The Middle

I think that historically the measurement has only happened at a high aggregate level—so there might be a report for the whole company. I think we need to develop a dashboard for middle managers so that they can set goals and celebrate what's achieved at a local level. [PAGE 7](#)

Addressing Family Culture

It's key that we have a very inclusive definition of what household and family is. The days of "Father Knows Best" where you have a man and his wife and two kids are really over. It's over because our demographics are changing. [PAGE 8](#)

Be Systematic

Be systematic. Changing culture is a step-by-step process; it's not an event. If you can stay systematic, I think you're ahead of the game. [PAGE 11](#)

DH: Have you had a success story that you can share about creating a healthy culture?

JA: Yes, definitely, but I must admit that none of the successes I'm going to describe could have happened under my own steam. They all happened because of the amazing clients and talented people I worked with.

When I first got involved with wellness, it was a project back in the 1970s with Coca-Cola. They had just bought Minute Maid orange juice, which made them the largest employer of migrant workers. The conditions were horrible—many of the supervisors were members of the Klan and all the laborers were black. It was the worst of the worst in terms of conditions of employment and healthy lifestyles were really an after-thought. I'm pleased to say Coca-Cola didn't want to run such an enterprise and they hired us to create more of a healthy work environment. I think they made a lot of progress, especially around the racism issue and reformulating work so it was more of a year-round effort and where children weren't left in the fields, but got a proper education. And many other successes were achieved and Coca-Cola was pleased because they gained a higher quality and productive labor force. So, I consider that a big success early on.

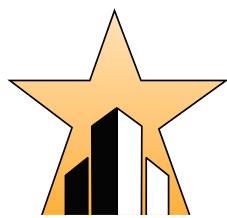
I also really liked the work I did with Union Pacific Railroad, and particularly Joe Luetzinger. Joe is a brilliant professional in our field and he always had a good read on what types of environment would bring out the best in railroad workers. He helped me design wellness mentor training—a peer support initiative. I was very pleased with all the work that he did. One year he would focus on norms around alcohol and drinking issues. Another year he would focus around sleep issues, and another year he would focus on physical activity and he was very successful in changing norms. I learned a lot about how to change norms by watching Joe laser in. He always kept his goals in parallel with the company's overall mission and goals were. So, if the company was interested in quality improvement, he adapted his wellness program to include quality improvement strategies in the way the program was designed. I always thought that he was brilliant and I was lucky to be tagging along and supporting him in that effort.

DH: If there's one piece of advice that you would offer to wellness practitioners across the country concerning healthy cultures, what would it be?

JA: I would say to be systematic. Changing culture is a step-by-step process; it's not an event. So the first step is to analyze the current conditions. The second is planting the seed of change and explaining why it's important—getting people involved. The third is to nurture that new culture with the touch points that I have talked about. Then, the fourth is to see what you've changed and to make plans for another round of culture change. And of course, to celebrate what you've achieved. So, if you can stay systematic, I think you're ahead of the game. **N&V**

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