When you consider how your mentors have guided your professional life, what qualities come to mind? Our mentors are our teachers and supporters, to be sure, but most people can name many people who have capably filled those roles in their lives. When you ask about mentors though, most people name just a few people because they were unique in what they saw in you and how they inspired you. They took a personal interest in you and made you feel that they knew what you were capable of, maybe even before you knew it yourself. They were a big part of helping you become the best you possible.

This issue of The Art of Health Promotion explores the connection between health and employee productivity and performance. As you’ll see, what makes this a vexing exercise is that wellness is not top of mind for position leaders who feel responsible for maximizing organizational performance. Indeed, without prompting, employee health may not make the list of the many attributes they discuss when they explain what distinguishes top performers.

A few months ago I joined a group of former teammates as we honored Arlynn Anderson, our college gymnastics coach, as he was inducted into the Athletic Hall of Fame at St. Cloud State University. It is a distinction that only comes to those who have posted a quantifiable record of extraordinary achievement. In Arlynn’s case, his 18 years of college coaching produced 18 all-American champions, 12 national champions, and three undefeated teams with more than 150 dual meet wins and 25 invitational wins. It was a thrill to see one of his 18 national champions, and three undefeated teams with more than his 18 years of college coaching produced 18 all-American champions, a quantifiable record of extraordinary achievement. In Arlynn’s case, it is a distinction that only comes to those who have posted an enviable win/loss record. Instead, we told stories.

What sets high performers apart? It is a question fitting for “The Art” section of this Journal because science will, at best, offer incomplete answers. Understanding what made Arlynn one of the best coaches in his era involved storytelling because most of the answers resided in Arlynn’s intangible qualities. If there was a common theme, it came down to Arlynn’s passion for the sport and his dedication to his teams. On a personal level, I can say his unrestrained enthusiasm for my progress offered continuous motivation for taking ever more audacious acrobatic risks. The times I landed on my head notwithstanding, Arlynn created an environment where it was safe, and expected, to get outside of your comfort zone. To get at the performance issue, I interviewed three Presidents of mid-sized organizations and you will see that, like the stories we athletes shared about a revered coach, these organizational leaders also resort to storytelling to get at the essence of high performance. “Well, let me tell you about an example that just happened the other day…” one of my interviewees said. As much as we value metrics, it often takes a story to get at why some employees get exceptional results and others don’t.

Does this mean that health and wellness are likely to be relegated to minor roles in the strategic thinking of organizational leaders looking for a competitive edge? Perhaps, but as one leader told me, it depends on whether he can be shown a clear pathway about how health improves performance. On this question, Dr. Jack Groppel provides a fascinating review of “the biology of business performance” for your consideration. To offer more stories related to what we found from my interviews with executives, I invited John Harris, a long-time leader in the wellness profession, to join me in a commentary on the connection between health and performance.

From Our Webinar
During our Webinar featuring Dr Michael Roizen and the wellness programs at Cleveland Clinic, (available at: healthpromotionjournal.com) we polled Webinar participants and found interesting variation concerning their decision to not hire smokers.

Some believe discrimination against smokers is a gateway to discriminating against others such as the obese. Do you think tobacco bans present an ethical slippery slope?

- Strongly disagree: 9%
- Disagree: 39%
- Not sure: 22%
- Agree: 25%
- Strongly agree: 5%

Editor, The Art of Health Promotion
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