

Employees' health may require the occasional food fight

Recently, I found myself running bare-foot around a meeting room, furiously hurling marshmallows at a friend.

Now, before you think we've gone soft in the head at the Rochester Business Alliance, my actions were to illustrate a point: Fitness can be fun, and creativity is alive and well in our local workplaces.

Let me take a step back to explain. Since 2007, the Rochester Business Alliance has worked with Wegmans Food Markets to roll out its Eat Well, Live Well Challenge through the community. The program promotes wellness by encouraging participants to eat healthier foods and get more exercise. The tool: an eight-week competition counting daily steps walked and cups of fruits and vegetables consumed.

Since 2007, the challenges have been organized seasonally, and 388 employers have engaged their workforces in at least one challenge. Half that group has signed up for repeated challenges. In fact, the Breast Cancer Coalition of Rochester has had a team participate in eight challenges. The city of Rochester, Eastman Kodak Co., LaBella Associates, Lunch-Byte Systems and Xerox Corp. have had teams in six challenges.

For the spring 2011 challenge, we decided to spice things up a bit. Typically, competition had been within a single company or within a single team. So we decided to launch a communitywide competition, with employers pitted against each other



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in three categories: average daily steps per team participant, average daily cups of fruits and vegetables consumed per team participant and most creative program to engage employees.

We were pleased when 51 of the 88 companies that signed on for the spring challenge opted to participate in this new competition. At the end of the challenge in June, we held a news conference at RBA offices to announce the finalists in three categories, and a winner in each. All 14 finalists—one company was a finalist in two categories—received framed certificates, and the three winners were awarded engraved trophies.

Coming in first with an average per participant of 11,221 steps per day was Ameritherm Inc., just outpacing Fairport's Dudley Elementary School, Foodlink, Soleo Communications and Web Seal Inc.

In first place in the fruits and vegetables contest with an average of 5.8 cups per person per day was Vnomics, and the Center for Dispute Settlement, Cryovac Sealed Air Corp., Harris Seeds and Pittsford Fed-

eral Credit Union came within a nibble.

The five finalists in the most creative program were Baldwin Richardson Foods, La Bella Associates, Paychex, Pittsford Federal Credit Union and Reliant Community Credit Union. Taking the top award was Reliant Community Credit Union—and that's where the marshmallows came in.

Reliant's team leaders, Barb DeRoo and Dawn Salantino, created a Passport to Wellness, which included weekly goals and places to chart indoor and outdoor fun activities, along with the obligatory steps and cups count. Then they gave their team members some food for thought, with such competitions as seeing how long you could keep a balloon aloft using only your head, seeing how far you could shuffle in one minute with an egg on top of your feet, and tossing a rice bag.

But the judges' favorite—the one we decided to demonstrate—was the snowball fight using marshmallows. Participants stood on opposite sides of a dividing line, each armed with 10 marshmallows. When the buzzer sounded, you had one minute to toss the marshmallows back and forth at each other. At the end, whoever had the fewest marshmallows on their side of the line was the winner.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I was roundly defeated by my friend and fellow judge, Cindy Reddick-LiDestri M.D., director of wellness programs at LiDestri Foods, while the third judge, Mary Ellen

Burris of Wegmans, cheered us on.

Afterward, we talked with some of the teams, and I was amazed by how dedicated local employers are to helping their workers be healthy.

■ Paychex, for example, had nearly 5,000 of its 12,000 employees nationwide engaged in the challenge.

■ Each of the 82 Baldwin Richardson employees competing received a "Challenge Starter Kit" with a cup-sized container for bringing vegetable or fruit snacks to work and a laminated card with a recipe for salad and a dressing created by one of the in-house food research and development staffers using Mrs. Richardson's Strawberry Topping.

■ LaBella Associates organized group Walking Wednesdays over the lunch hour.

■ Rochester Business Journal team leaders provided healthy facts of the day and quizzed participants on their knowledge.

■ Unity Health Systems teams hosted Wii dance contests.

In a world where employers are often criticized for focusing only on profits, it was wonderful to see so many local employers investing time, resources and energy in their most valuable assets—the people who work for them. It's that kind of teamwork and vision that make our community special.

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