Ballard: Welcome back to the Good Company podcast, joining us today is Dr. Rebecca Kelly, Director of Health Promotion and Wellness at the University of Alabama. Glad to have you joining us today.

Kelly: Thank you David, it's a pleasure to be with everyone.

Ballard: Well, I thought we'd start out with some really concrete examples of how an organization can go about identifying the needs of its workforce.

Kelly: That's an excellent question and as organizations are moving forward with their health management, health and wellness program, they do need to have a clear blueprint of what the steps are. Now, the organizational needs can be determined by qualitative and quantitative analysis. For example, some of the best information you may not find in your claims data. I think sometimes the best information comes from just asking individuals. Secondly, we know from all the literature that the quantitative analysis, in addition to the qualitative analysis, is key. So there's a lot of data and David, there are organizations that are really exploring and integrating this data for employers. There are also certain employers that said, we want a multi-disciplinary team that collects our own data and looks at this so that we can identify and predict some of these emerging trends where the opportunities are.

Ballard: So, you're really talking about looking at the hard data, but also drilling down and understanding the needs and preferences of the individuals and the organization. And, I imagine that involvement of employees in that way really contributes to engaging them in these efforts. That's something that you've been really successful at in the work that you've done, both where you are now, but also at the American Cast Iron Pipe Company. If I remember correctly, you were talking about participation rates of upward of 80%.

Kelly: Absolutely, and participation rates over a three-year period are really 95%. So the question is, how do you motivate individuals to participate in your organization? Part of this is, is your organization ready for health. And what we want to explore here is really the culture of an organization, or the underlying current that exists in an organization. Not all organizations really care about their employees and in some cases, the employees don't care about their employer. And if there is not a high level of trust, the engagement will not occur. Within my previous work and current work, we realize that the health agenda has to be part of the overall agenda for the organization. Health is part of your company and it has to be part of your company's mission -- it has to be part of the objectives and the deliverables that you're exploring. There has to be a priority placed on it from a high level. How do you engage individuals? Well, there's different methods of engagement. And I would say, one of the keys to success is a high level of communication, so having a strong communication strategy. Where I have found some of the greatest success is with this high visibility or what we call the high-reach, high-touch approach -- it's where you actually go to the employee, in their work setting, and share with them that they are important to you. Because if you can't spend a few minutes with them in their workplace, in their work setting, who's to say that they're going to take any time to explore and learn about what you're doing. And so everybody has a responsibility in an organization and it's just again, creating that culture and allowing for that strong communication. There's also engagement through incentives. So again, helping to reward individuals by taking small steps. That could be the example of a program that we delivered in helping individuals to lose weight. Instead of the individual coming in to a session, we would have teams of three to five individuals who would come in together. They have this social support, which again, helps to increase the level of participation and engagement and they would weigh on a platform scale. And, they would do this for a ten or twelve week period of time and then we would have maintenance sessions as well throughout the year. But, we would see a much greater level of retention, a much higher success in terms of the outcome we were desiring and just an overall
improvement in not only employee morale, but just in the retention. We also noticed that there was a reduction in absenteeism due to -- again, knowing that somebody else at that organization in addition to your immediate supervisor and those you work with, actually cares about you.

Ballard: Now, you mentioned everybody having a responsibility in terms of engagement. Can you talk a little bit about the leader’s role in the organization in terms of motivating the workforce as well as how they might utilize champions, employees, to drive some of these programs and engagement in them?

Kelly: We are all looking at what are the solutions, what is that opportunity to make and improve health, when we're not always saying, well what am I doing. So it's walking the talk, it's making sure that our leaders not only are talking about improving employee health, but they're delivering the message. And the way that that can be shared is that your CEO and President can lead a walk, your CEO or President can encourage individuals to participate in healthy behaviors through a message that comes out. Again, if we're going to talk about having an improved, healthy workforce, we also have to realize that there has to be some financial contribution. A lot of organizations get a very tiny budget and are asked to just work wonders within this budget. So, the leadership has to be supportive, not only do they have to serve as the role model, but they also need to be supportive. Now, not all leaders are convinced that there is a true return of investment on this, so the other thing that has to take place is that within your organization, you need to have individuals who can share that information to top-management. A lot of organizations have established either a wellness team, in our case at the university, we now have wellness ambassadors, 50 individuals that represent different parts of the organization that help in our promotion campaigns, provide our Office of Health Promotion and Wellness with feedback for what we can do and deliver in a better way. And, that helps in the delivery and engagement as well.

Ballard: You mentioned leaders walking the talk. As a health and wellness professional yourself, how do you lead by example? What do you do to stay healthy and model those behaviors to employees?

Kelly: What we have learned, especially through our life skills, is that often times individuals don't have an opportunity to add another piece to their life pie. And, what that meant for me and for those individuals that I lead at the university is, how can we connect improved health through wellness and other exercise, eating healthy, tobacco control, as part of your day. Let's not add more to your day, that's just more stress, so we have started, actually at the university, “moving meetings.” And what that means David, is when individuals have meetings in the morning and especially if they're recurring -- if it's every morning for 30 minutes -- we are now seeing individuals exercising together for that first 30 minutes. So, they may be walking around the quad, they may be meeting at the rec center to hold their morning meeting instead of around a table with coffee, they're actually moving with their water. And so it's a wonderful opportunity to increase the exercise and the well-being of individuals without adding yet another amount of time to an already busy schedule. Personally, that's what I do. I meet every morning, I go in early, I meet my colleagues and we are on the Stairmaster or some type of an elliptical and we're holding our morning meetings and we get more done and we're more productive throughout the day because we've had that first power hour of discussion.

Ballard: Sounds like a great way to start the day.

Kelly: It has been, and additionally with my background in nutrition and diabetes education, we realize that individuals who pack their lunches, or again their snacks, are much healthier in terms of their eating. When we do eat out, we tend to eat a larger percentage of calories and of course, fat grams and so what we've also started doing is we purchased a small refrigerator and now we plan for the week, what we're going to eat and so we bring in salads, we bring in healthy luncheon meats, we have healthy breads, we have fruits, we have tea, of course coffee and other things. But it really has helped us eat more appropriately and then when we do have lunch meetings, we still go out. Organizations are also moving forward as we are and looking at their food policy. So, if an organization is responsible for paying for the meals, or the breaks, or you know hosting an event, that there is now a food policy that encourages healthy foods in all of those meetings and programs. Because again, if the employer's going to purchase this and are trying to improve the health, what better way than to create some policies and change that environment.
Ballard: You talked a little while ago about the importance of an organizational culture, and creating a culture of health and wellness. What steps can an employer take to fit a health and wellness program into the organization?

Kelly: I think it goes back to the organization's values. Does the organization value their human capital? When you purchase a $2 million piece of equipment, you call that valuable, we have to take care of that. What's interesting is when we have an amazing workforce, we don't always come to work saying, you are so valuable to me and I've got to do whatever I can to take care of you and make sure you're productive, you're motivated, you're engaged, that you want to come to work. And so, how does an organization do that? Well, I don't know that I have all the answers and I certainly will never say that I do, but I think you can start with some small steps and some of those small steps again, it goes back to that qualitative analysis. It's asking your employees, what motivates you? What encourages you to come to work? And in my experience, it's different things. As you know David, we often times assume that if you pay someone well, they'll come to work. But the reality is, if they have handsome salary and yet, there's no opportunity for growth, well, that may not increase their level of engagement.

Ballard: In terms of the signature programs that you've developed over the years, I think it really stands out how good a fit they have been with the organizational culture where you were at the time, in terms of level of involvement of employees, engagement of those employees, but could you talk a little bit about the advantages and disadvantages of building programs versus buying them?

Kelly: Absolutely. I believe that a lot of organizations have the tools internally to build a successful health program. They may have to hire a coordinator or a manager of their employee health management or wellness, but essentially, they have many tools right there. They just have to coordinate the discovery to help all the stakeholders realize that all we need to do is build bridges. We've got all these wonderful resources, so in some settings the resources are already there, you need to the connector, you need the bridge builder, you need that individual that will be very instrumental in making things work. So, in terms of the internal program, building it versus the external opportunity of partnering with a vendor, I think there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Having the internal program will require much more time. It may require three to five years to really get your agenda moving because you have to spend that time convincing the stakeholders this is a good thing. The partner opportunity or if you purchase or buy a program, has some great benefits and those might include, that the program’s ready to go. They have to do some customization to it, but essentially, it's been demonstrated to be successful, at least if we've done our homework, and it's picked the best partner for us. But, in most cases, they have the tools, they have the resources, they are able to deliver onsite programs, they're able to deliver online programs, they're able to deliver telephonic programs. They understand strategy, they can come in and do the qualitative and quantitative analysis, they can build the strategy, they can get things up and going within about six months. So, from a time element, certainly the opportunity is there with the purchase; however, in purchasing it, you don't always have the ownership. So, I like to see organizations, especially if they have internal resources, I like them to look at what they have internally, have that connecting person, have a connecting system, kind of a data integration system, so that they can be looking at continued trends and what's going on where they need to spend their time and resources and then identify your partners that you need. So, whatever you can't do internally, then connect with an external partner to deliver the best integrated program.

Ballard: Now, let's really get concrete here for a minute and talk about some specific things that small employers and those with limited budgets can do to start building a culture of health and wellness.

Kelly: Well, first of all, look at your local non-profit organizations, work with the American Psychological Association, you have excellent programs, you have excellent model companies to explore and learn from. I call it window shopping and what's available, what might fit your organization. Obviously, we have our other non-profit organizations, the Heart Association, Cancer Society, there's so many and I won't list them all. Many of them already have existing tool kits to help organizations. One of the most impactful opportunities is changing the environment. Well, if you're not a tobacco-free workplace, that would be a way that we could move an organization forward in improving their health. If they have onsite vending and a cafeteria and they're serving unhealthy food, well, that's another way that we can change the environment to then change the behavior. It doesn't have to be the expensive, high-end
solutions. One size never fits all, but I think we can customize it based on the organization and what your current environment looks like and how to move that forward. And then to also supplement that with educational programs, that again, may be available through some of your local organizations and partners that you have identified.

Ballard: In terms of organizational setting, you've made some pretty dramatic changes in the recent years, shifting from the American Cast Iron Pipe Company to the University of Alabama, I imagine, was a pretty big change for you. And being in an academic setting, I'm wondering what biggest challenges are for you there in terms of creating a health and wellness program.

Kelly: Yeah, David, thanks. It's a great question and everyday I think I would have a different response. One of the main differences is that I went from an organization that had three other activities to compete with, for example, in my previous employer setting, we had a bank, we had a medical center and we had a cafeteria onsite in addition to the workplace and the wellness center. So, outside of going to work, there wasn't a whole lot to do. At the university, within a given day, there are 100 different things you could do, from a sporting event to something going on with the theatre, with the arts, there's so much -- we're really trying to brand our program because in the previous setting, there wasn't a lot of competition. The other difference is that I moved from manufacturing -- which again 25% of the workforce might have spent the majority of their day in front of a computer, to the university setting where 90 plus percent have access and are constantly around this technology. And so it's making sure that the campaigns and messages are still delivered, but they have to be delivered in different ways.

We developed a program at the university last fall which was called “Strive for Five” and it was a very simple campaign, it was eat, drink, think, move, lose: eat five fruits and vegetables a day, drink five cups of water or more a day, think five positive health messages a week and move five days or four or five thousand steps if you have a pedometer and then lose five pounds. It was over a ten week period of time, it was teams of three to five individuals. We did a preliminary pilot of the program in the summer and what we learned is that individuals weren't ready to make all five changes. They were only ready, as a team, to do two of the five changes, so when we launched the program with over a thousand of our faculty and staff, we allowed them to choose two of the five health improvement opportunities to make and we had over 95% retention in the program, we lost thousands of pounds, ate truckfuls of fruits and vegetables, but it really moved people and changed their behavior. They went from consuming an average of one-and-a-half cups of water to four-and-a-half cups of water. They went from eating one fruit or vegetable a day, to eating over six fruits and vegetables a day and that's meaningful. And again, it's the small steps that will help to yield those big rewards.

Ballard: Well, you certainly have a knack for building creative health and wellness programs that fit really well with an organizational culture and create real and sustained behavior change. So I'll be keeping my eye on the University of Alabama because I'm looking forward to what comes next. Well, Rebecca thanks for taking the time and joining us today, it's always a pleasure.

Kelly: You are welcome, thank you so much David.