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Companies heed Bush's call to battle

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RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK - Robert Ingram is accustomed to important phone calls. As vice chairman of pharmaceuticals and former president of GlaxoSmithKline, he has for years made decisions involving large sums of money and affecting thousands of employees.

But when Ingram received a call one day in 2001 with a special request from former President George H.W. Bush, he knew it was more than just business as usual. He also knew he couldn't say no.

"When the former president calls to ask you something, you know that you're going to say yes," Ingram says with a laugh.

Bush's charge to Ingram was direct: use his position as the president of a large corporation to do something "bold" in the fight against cancer.

Shortly after receiving the call, Ingram assembled a team of executives from pharmaceutical companies and Triangle businesses to discuss ways to transform Bush's entreaty into a substantive stand against cancer in the workplace.

It was evident right away that much work needed to be done.

"We started asking ourselves, 'What are we doing in our own companies ... to encourage (cancer) prevention?'" Ingram recalls about the group's first meeting on the GSK campus in RTP. "We found we were doing not very much at all."

Though that meeting created more questions than answers, it was the first of what ultimately became the CEO Roundtable on Cancer, a consortium of CEOs, health-care researchers and cancer experts who meet annually to discuss ways to develop and implement initiatives in the workplace to reduce the risk of cancer among employees.

Incorporated in 2001 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation and funded through donations, the organization has grown to include 27 members from a diverse mix of industries, including banking, health care, insurance and manufacturing.

Measuring actions against cancer

With offices in donated space on SAS Institute's campus in Cary, the consortium in 2006 launched its first workplace initiative, the CEO Cancer Gold Standard, with the support of the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Public Health and the American Cancer Society.

The CEO Roundtable on Cancer developed the Gold Standard as a way to measure how proactive companies are being in promoting cancer prevention and treatment among employees and their families. To be accredited, a company's CEO must personally affirm his or her commitment to the goals of the roundtable and demonstrate that the organization meets a series of strict criteria, including the following:

- Establishing and enforcing tobacco-free workplace policies;
- Ensuring health benefit plans that include coverage at no cost for tobacco-cessation counseling and medications;
- Providing access to nutrition and weight-control programs;
- Sustaining a culture that promotes physical activity;
- Offering health-benefit plans that eliminate cost as a barrier to accessing cancer-screening tests and exams;
- Providing education about and promotion of cancer clinical trials;
- Offering health-benefit plans that eliminate cost as a barrier to accessing cancer clinical trials; and
- Ensuring that health-benefit plans provide access to cancer care at Commission on Cancer-approved facilities and/or National Cancer Institute-approved cancer centers.

In its first two years, the roundtable accredited 13 companies - three of which, GlaxoSmithKline, Quintiles Transnational and SAS Institute, are located in the Triangle. More than 20 companies have been targeted for accreditation in the next two years.

"One of the keystones of the roundtable is that all of the business leaders within this group believe that taking a more wellness-based approach as opposed to a sickness-based approach is a better way of making a difference in terms of the overall cost and number of lives that can be positively affected," says John Dornan, executive director of the CEO Roundtable on Cancer. "We've estimated conservatively that there are already 500,000 employees and dependents that are covered through Gold Standard-accredited companies ... who are receiving better screening and taking a more active role in the prevention of cancer."

That's reason enough to pursue Gold Standard initiatives, says Chris Viehbacher, president of U.S. pharmaceuticals for GSK.

"Cancer is the biggest killer of people between the ages of 25 and 60," he says. "If you marry that with a technical piece of data, which is that 75 percent of cancer is preventable, you start to realize that CEOs can do a lot of good if we start taking the initiative."

Dealing with push back

Wellness programs introduced at GSK include a comprehensive smoke-free workplace program, smoking-cessation counseling, on-site mammography and cash bonuses for participating in anonymous health assessment surveys.

Viehbacher acknowledges that some initiatives prove more difficult to sell than others.

"We do get push back. We had a lot of managers saying, 'Well ,we're going to lose our productivity,'" he says. "But you just have to say this is the right thing to do, and it is what we are going to do."

Because resources vary among companies - not all have cafeterias and fitness centers, for example - costs involved with initiating Gold Standard-related programs differ. Small companies can achieve Gold Standard accreditation by taking different approaches, such as promoting corporate walks associated with other fundraising causes or by providing healthier options during catered meetings or lunches.

Dornan says employers, regardless of size, should expect to see some cost increases as they initiate new health screenings and coverage, but that they should be short-lived.

"What we have found ... is that after one year it's cost neutral, and after two years it actually becomes cost effective because you're (identifying illnesses) earlier, which makes treatment cheaper in the long run," he says.

Viehbacher says the biggest challenge is getting people to think differently about their health and the role of management in supporting that change.

"If you look at the actual aspects of this - tobacco cessation, encouraging diet and nutrition, physical activity, screening and treatment - it's not really cost that's a barrier," he says. "Really, it's changing the culture inside the workplace and having a change-management program. You have to have sponsorship from the top."

Ingram says the roundtable is off to a good start, but much more work needs to be done.

"Our best asset is our people," he says. "The more companies take an active role in the prevention and treatment of cancer for their employees, the more we can make a significant difference in the fight against cancer."

BIOTECHS OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The following are the companies and other organizations that have signed on as members of the CEO Roundtable: American Cancer Society; AstraZeneca; Bayer; Bristol-Myers Squibb; Cigna Corp.; Duke University Health System; Edelman; Eli Lilly & Co.; Enzon Pharmaceuticals; GlaxoSmithKline; Johnson & Johnson; Lehman Brothers; McKinsey & Co.; MD Anderson Cancer Center; Mutual of America; Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp.; OSI Pharmaceuticals; Pfizer Inc.; Quintiles Transnational; Reliant Pharmaceuticals; Sanofi-Aventis; SAS Institute; Schering-Plough; State Farm Insurance Cos.; Valeant Pharmaceuticals International; Wachovia Corp.; Wyeth