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Health Before Wealth: Partnership and Collaboration in Your Personal and Professional Life

By Mark E. Rose, chair and CEO of Avison Young October 18, 2017 11:00 am EST

As a former college athlete who was constantly in motion, I found the concept of being overweight, at risk and unwell, difficult to accept. But the signs were all there: feedback from family, friends and physicians begging me to worry about my weight, to make my health a priority. But I really didn't care to hear any of it. In December of 2013 and again one month later, two Avison Young partners and dear friends acting on the same impulse delivered the same speech – and the same book – to me. Both told me I didn't look well, and both asked me to read "Younger Next Year" (Workman Publishing Company, 2017). It was hard to ignore this coincidence, but I managed to do just that anyway.



Then on March 18, 2014, a double dose of reality hit. During breakfast with our private-equity shareholders, I was told that I looked unhealthy. When I returned home that day, a package was waiting, which contained an autographed picture of me with legendary golfer Phil Mickelson from a recent outing. That picture unleashed a torrent of personal reflection and, finally, prompted an honest assessment of the shape that I was in. Phil isn't a little man, but the guy next to him was obese and hardly recognizable.

Making a change

What transpired was life-altering. I halved my daily calorie intake, replaced bread, sugar-based foods, soda and wine with sparkling water, fruits, vegetables, chicken and fish. I viewed snacks such as mocha coffee or chocolate chip cookies as treats rather than daily mainstays. I began working out 20 minutes per day on an elliptical machine, then walking, treadmills, running, biking and swimming. I shed four pounds a week for 10 weeks and set my first goal: to participate in a triathlon scheduled two and a half months later.

By the time I competed in the Chicago triathlon, I had lost 60 pounds, increased my sleep time by 75 percent and felt like a different person. I bought a new wardrobe and embraced a new world – including an epic vacation climbing mountains in three countries.

Spreading the health

I felt most proud and content when I had the chance to share the experience with our entire company. In a twist at the start of my closing speech at our Avison Young 2014 Annual General Meeting, I presented before and after pictures of my journey to health. I spoke about the process, the pain I endured, and explained why I needed to do this for myself, my family and our company.

I ended the speech with a challenge to wellness for all my colleagues. A challenge to feel better, live better and live longer. Together, we agreed to recognize the achievements of those who wanted to take the challenge. I offered to personally mentor anyone who needed someone by his or her side, and was gratified by how many took me up on it.

Our head of human resources, Pam Mazza, explained the challenge to our health insurance carriers. They dropped our premiums by one percent and contributed \$50,000 to hire an employee wellness consultant. The results and stories have been better than anyone could have imagined.

Collectively, we have lost thousands of pounds and changed people's lives. Sedentary lifestyles have given way to working out, running, cycling and playing sports. Triathletes have moved on to Iron Man competitions and, importantly, we are doing it together.

We have lowered health care costs – both for the company and for employees – and three years into the program, we were honored to receive Assurance's recognition of Avison Young as a 2017 Minimizing Risk, Maximizing Health Award recipient for our focus on healthcare consumerism and employee wellness. Assurance worked with us throughout the entire process – choosing a wellness vendor, formalizing the wellness program and increasing Health Savings Account (HSA) plan participation.

Assurance principal Paul Bartman said our team did a tremendous job of dedicating time and resources to help get the message across and engage people. Last month, a senior professional emailed that, after committing to improving her health and wellness in 2014, she lost almost 90 pounds. She said that her life has been transformed, mentally and physically, and she now wants to help others attain wellness. It was hard not to get emotional when I read that story.

Our workplace and our culture are built on collaboration and a sense of family. It is truly inspiring to see how a shared commitment to wellness is changing lives for the better.

About the author: Mark Rose is the chair and CEO of [Avison Young](#) and chair of the board of directors of Avison Young (Canada) Inc. He manages all strategic, financial and operational activities of this full-service commercial real estate company, which provides solutions to real estate investors, owners and occupiers throughout the world.

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