

The Bottom Line Is Where You Draw It

By Gary Erickson
Owner and Founder, Clif Bar, Inc.

About 15 years ago, from a garage I shared with my dog, assorted outdoor gear and a couple of trumpets, I founded the business that would become Clif Bar, Inc. Back then, it seemed natural to combine my passion for endurance sports with a lifelong love of food and pleasure at the table. Today, Clif Bar is the leading maker of organic and natural energy foods and beverages.

You may wonder what I have to add to the discussion about health care. Truth is, I think a lot about the health and well being of my Clif Bar colleagues and our consumers. At its very core, this company is about health.

Clif Bar makes energy products for active people to enjoy while they're out pursuing their passion. We make healthful products, based on sound nutritional science. Unlike most of the chemically-laden products in the sports nutrition field, Clif and Luna bars, gels and beverages are made without artificial ingredients and harmful trans fats. We've converted many of our products and ingredients to organic because we feel that this form of agriculture is better for our planet. We are proud to sponsor athletes of all ages and abilities because we model healthfulness in all aspects of our business.

A focus on health also translates to the way we treat our employees. I'll give you some examples. In our Berkeley, Calif., headquarters, home to about 100 employees, there's a full gym offering about 25 fitness classes, all during business hours. We have four personal trainers working full time to help our employees stay strong. We keep a couple of loaner bikes tuned up and ready to go, so that employees can pedal, rather than drive, to complete local errands. Employees can take part in company sponsored bike rides, ski trips and other outings – strictly optional activities, but you may be surprised at how popular they've become.

Apart from encouraging our employees to be fit, we've thought of other ways to help them improve their overall health and well being. In addition to providing a full complement of health insurance benefits, we offer health screenings, massage, and help with everyday errands – such as car repair and laundry. Every employee is eligible for a sabbatical after seven years with the company. Some of the staff elects the option to work 80 hours every 9 days and take every other Friday off. We also encourage employees to volunteer during business hours, and have committed 2080 hours a year – the equivalent of one full time employee – to community service.

Yes, my colleagues are more productive, creative and nimble when they and their families are well. But aside from that, I really like these people. At Clif Bar, I've tried to create an atmosphere where people enjoy working and playing together; the foundation of this effort has been assembling a diverse group of talented, energetic and just plain likable people.

What's more, it's important to remember that these days, work and life aren't as distinct as they once were. Sometimes the best business solutions hit a person when they're miles from the office skiing or hiking. Other days a parent may be called away from the workplace by an ailing child. As difficult as it is to separate work from life, in my mind it's also impossible to separate health from life. Health shouldn't be something you 'do' a half hour a day, four days a week. That's why at Clif Bar, we strive to integrate health into all aspects of our workplace.

Does it cost money to emphasize the health of our employees? Yes, but it's surprisingly affordable, especially when a monetary bottom line isn't a full and complete reflection of corporate merit. Here, at the company I named after my father, we have outlined five business aspirations that we use to measure our success. As such, we work to sustain our brands, our business, our people, our community and the planet. Without each of these elements functioning in concert with one another, Clif Bar could not thrive.

Why, in a time of cost cutting and bottom line consciousness, have we chosen this path? Simply stated, it is my belief that the bottom line is where you draw it. Business, as one of the largest consumers of health care, must be a part of designing a system that more proactively addresses the physical and mental health needs of its employees. Clif Bar is just one medium-sized, private company, doing what it can to promote the health and well being of its employees. We strive to provide satisfying work, good benefits, and a healthy workspace. In return, we are richly rewarded with a healthy, motivated group of employees who take few sick days, and a have high retention rate. They are fiercely loyal and energetic, and this company is carried to success every day on their shoulders.

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