

Going the distance: Small changes lead to big success

Energy for Life program helps Allstaters build balance in life, create customer focus

Editor's note: Written by Maggie Cagney as part of the Allstate NOW team

One day in 2013, Ciaran McGonagle sat in his Allstate office in Derry, Northern Ireland. The senior team manager, Agency Solutions Integration, had just finished Energy for Life, and it got him thinking.

As is the case with so many, McGonagle had a bucket list. Its to-dos had shifted over time, but that day, one thing quickly moved to the top. McGonagle was going to run a marathon.

"It was something I kept putting off," McGonagle said. "The course makes you focus on making one change and writing down one goal. Writing that down made it real. I went home that evening and actually registered for [my first marathon], and then started to plan."

Little did he know that list would take him around the world.

The Energy for Life experience has transformed since Allstate rolled out the program in 2010, but the fundamental goal remains the same: It's a well-being initiative to help participants understand their purposes and strike balance between their health, families and work – one step at a time.

For McGonagle, this meant building a training program that worked around the needs of his family and job.

"I knew I wasn't going to go out the next day and change everything at once; I had to start small," McGonagle said. "I started running 5Ks and balanced out what I could get in with my work and family. When I [began training for a marathon], I had one kid with another kid on the way and thought, 'if I don't do this now, I will never do it.' There were techniques through EFL that helped me balance it all."

Some of that balance meant running during the lunch hour or after work. Over time, he said he started noticing a change in his energy and health, promoting a positive balance in all areas of his life.

Expanding its reach

Since its inception, Energy for Life has helped 23,000 employees, agency owners and members of their staffs focus on what's important to them and their businesses.

The program has gained momentum, now reaching Allstaters in Canada, Northern Ireland and India's Allstate Solutions Private Limited, both through its virtual and live offerings.

And success echoes through the voices and feedback of participants like McGonagle.

Eighty-seven percent of those who responded to a post-workshop survey said they gained more energy with friends and family outside of work. And 77 percent said their daily actions are more consistent with their life's purpose.

A strong foundation

To understand EFL at its core, you have to look back at how it started: helping elite athletes improve their performances.

"Before we brought EFL to Allstate in 2010, participants went through what was the Corporate Athlete Course at The Human Performance Institute," said Mary Katzner, senior manager, EFL. "The two founders of the Institute started their work 30 years ago with top athletes to find ways to become more effective in their training and work. They found that at the heart of an individual's ability to perform was managing energy across multiple dimensions."

As the work evolved and the founders took it beyond athletes – and into medicine, the government and the corporate world – participants learned managing energy is the key to performing in high-stress environments without sacrificing health and happiness.

"Many people begin to realize the importance of taking care and focusing on themselves to consistently perform and achieve well-being," Katzner said. "They realize the importance to simply be: be the best leader, be the best family member, be the most successful in their agency – whatever that is to that individual. Energy for Life allows them to live into whatever is important in their lives."

Energy of "a winning culture"

Energy for Life isn't just helping transform employees' mental and physical well-being – it's also helping Allstaters think differently about how they do their work.

"Today we're focused on how we embed energy management principles into business practices, particularly with agency owners," Katzner said. "We want to infuse this into how we do business at Allstate."

This means continuing to find ways to bring that energy into agencies by making it part of the training available to licensed sales professionals, Katzner said.

When Kansas agency owner Tim Waltrip took Energy for Life in Kansas City in 2011 and again at National Forum in 2012, he learned about bringing energy not only to his personal and professional life, but to his entire staff.

"I think about it as energy for a winning culture," Waltrip said. "If you don't have a winning culture in your agency, you can't sustain the yearlong trials and tribulations to get to the end. In order to have a winning culture, you have to have a caring culture. I think when my staff sees that I care about them and their well-being, they are going to turn around and apply that care to customers."

And Waltrip doesn't just think of a winning culture within his own agency; he considers it when thinking about his fellow agency owners.

This month, Waltrip worked with EFL coaches to organize a workshop with 40 agency owners and LSPs across Kansas City.

"I think it's important to actually do it together so that it has a lasting impact," Waltrip said. "Once we go through this together, our language in the agency will change, our collective approach to our many challenges will change, and I can't wait to see what we can do when we are all on the same page, encouraging each other's success – both professionally and personally."

The workshop's idea of small changes and refueling are concepts Waltrip – who also has the running bug – and McGonagle have found translatable in a variety of life scenarios.

In Waltrip's office, he meets with his team every day, which gives everyone a chance to reflect on the week and how to help each other as a team, he said.

"I've learned that a lot of little things add up if you're going to go the distance," Waltrip said of his own marathon training. "You need to have the right shoes, the right energy and the right plan. You have to fuel throughout the entire ordeal, or you aren't going to make it. Apply that to the office and it's the same thing: We have yearlong goals, and we have big things we want to accomplish. The little things add up and they give you the extra punches of fuel you need to finish the race strong."

One marathon at a time

This leads back to McGonagle's bucket list.

In October, McGonagle completed the Chicago Marathon, finishing fifth in his age group and 102nd overall, with a time of 2 hours, 35 minutes.

Chicago was one of 10 marathons McGonagle completed since 2013, including Berlin, London and Dublin. Next on the horizon are Boston, New York and Tokyo, he said.

But with each goal achieved, McGonagle said he always find his way back to his original training mission: one step – one marathon – at a time.

"No matter how small that step may be, just make that commitment to yourself," McGonagle said. "Pick something achievable, whether it be walking a few miles or changing your diet. I think once you start doing that, you'll see the benefits that provide the energy and motivation to do bigger things, make bigger goals – and run marathons."