

A Patient-Centered Culture Begins With a Focus on Healthcare Workers

BY GLEN B. EARL

The healthcare industry is in the midst of tremendous change. There are external forces, such as government regulation, and internal forces, such as employee and patient expectations, that test and strain organizational resources. To reach safe harbor, healthcare organizations must develop and maintain a culture that sustains organizational life.

If one uses the analogy that organizational culture is like a boat, then the talent are the rowers. To win the race, the boat must be finely crafted, expertly built, and taken care of very well. Unless the same care is taken with the rowers, while the boat looks grand, it will not race well. Therefore, to have a sustainable patient-centered culture, a healthcare organization must have a well-crafted and well-executed talent management system; one that supports and works well within a patient-centered culture. Talent management must focus on right hire, right development, and right retention.



Best-in-class hospitals apply a talent management strategy with both employees and patients in mind.

Right hire

Best-in-class healthcare organizations are patient-centered or fast approaching that type of culture. Healthcare organizations that do not become patient-centered will cease to exist or become irrelevant and obsolete.

When hiring, healthcare organizations must look for competencies that have been shown to correlate well with a patient-centered environment. According to a March 2015 article on talent strategies and patient-centered culture by Molly Gamble in *Becker's Hospital Review*, the following competencies were shown to be critical to good patient outcomes:

- **Compassion and empathy**—Employees must be focused on patient well-being and have a natural and internal desire to care for and care about patients and their needs.
- **Emotional intelligence**—With this understanding and awareness, employees alter their communication and behavior styles for better outcomes for themselves, their patients, and the families.
- **Collaboration**—For excellent patient outcomes, the care delivery team must work well together, coordinating care and resources.
- **Adaptability**—Healthcare workers must be aware of the impending changes, and make the necessary adjustments.

Right hire means that the organization has developed a profile of an excellent employee; that is, an employee who has matching (or very similar) work values, fits into the culture, and has the aforementioned competencies. Best practice healthcare organizations create a profile or template of a successful incumbent and use that when recruiting, interviewing, and selecting candidates. While clinical and technical skills are givens, organizational fit becomes vital. Using behavioral interviewing practices and assessing for critical competencies helps to ensure excellent fit.

Right development

Regardless of organizational position and professional specialty, in today's world, one of

the most important employee benefits is professional development. Historically, most healthcare development has been for a clinical/technical specialty, accomplished for legal and licensure reasons.

Competencies are partially a combination of a natural characteristic and an entrained value, but they most certainly can be developed. Therefore, healthcare organizations can alter their culture by developing employees' competencies that match a patient-centered culture. People can become more compassionate, collaborate better, be more adaptable, and become more emotionally intelligent. All these competencies are, in large part, learned behavior.

Healthcare organizations must begin to understand and accept the reality that developing employees is not only the right thing to do; it positively affects the bottom line. "The right training not only leads to increases in productivity and customer satisfaction, but at least a 20 percent jump in profits," said Jim Wynn, chief education officer at Promethean, which commissioned the 2012 survey "Training Out of the Recession." He added: "Skills training is not just a growth issue, but a vital component for companies to surviving this recession."

Right retention

Two of the most significant elements that determine employee retention are the employee's manager and opportunity for professional growth and development. Therefore, one of the biggest factors in employee retention and patient experience is leadership development. Well-developed leaders help to ensure a vibrant organization, where employee engagement is high and patient experience is excellent.

Developing all employees for competencies that improve the patient experience becomes paramount for sustained organizational life. It is essential for any healthcare organization that wants high scores on independent patient-experience assessments to spend the necessary resources on developing employees, especially its leaders.

HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS THAT DO NOT BECOME PATIENT-CENTERED WILL CEASE TO EXIST OR BECOME IRRELEVANT AND OBSOLETE.

Employee engagement = patient experience

There are several studies that link employee engagement and patient experience. For example, in “The Impact of Nursing Work Environments on Patient Safety Outcomes,” a 2006 *Journal of Nursing Administration* article, authors Heather Laschinger and Michael Leiter conclude that “patient safety outcomes are related to the quality of the nursing practice work environment and nursing leadership’s role in changing the work environment to decrease nurse burnout.”

And in the 2011 *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* article “Promoting Patient-Centered Care,” Karen Luxford, Dana Gelb Safran, and Tom Delbanco found that the key facilitators for making care more patient-centered are:

- strong, committed senior leadership
- clear communication of strategic vision
- active engagement of patient and families throughout the institution
- sustained focus on staff satisfaction
- active measurement and feedback reporting of patient experiences
- adequate resourcing of care delivery redesign
- staff capacity building
- accountability and incentives
- a culture strongly supportive of change and learning.

An interesting finding is that high employee engagement both directly affects the patient experience and also is a distinct correlation with healthcare worker engagement and their health: According to Michael A. West and Jeremy F. Dawson’s *Employee Engagement and NHS Performance*, “Staff with high levels of engagement were less likely to report suffering from work-related stress, and were less likely to feel pressure to come to work when they were not fully fit to do so. Generally speaking, employees who reported higher engagement (in all three dimensions—motivation, involve-

ment and advocacy) were more likely to rate their own health and wellbeing more highly.”

Implementation

According to Kristin Baird’s January 2014 *Becker’s Hospital Review* article, “Engaged, Empowered and Enthused,” there are five ways executive leadership can improve both employee engagement and patient experience:

- **Vision**—Develop and extoll the organization’s vision.
- **Expectations**—Establish expectations of behavior standards; hold all employees to those standards.
- **Resources**—Provide resources to support expectations and priorities.
- **Accountability**—Create systems to hold people accountable; two ways to ensure accountability are to hardwire employee/patient rounding and employee coaching.
- **Coaching**—Coaching employees has been found to be one of the most beneficial and cost-effective means to develop employees, improve engagement, and establish positive cultural norms.

Creating a culture of coaching where all employees are coached, either by their leaders or by internal/external coaches can significantly improve both employee engagement and patient satisfaction. The coaching process, when done well, becomes a driver for organizational change.

Traditionally, many healthcare organizations operated as either a permissive culture or a punitive culture. Today, healthcare organizations are moving to a culture of accountability and to a just culture. Using the many methods described here, healthcare organizations can make the necessary changes to stay alive, stay relevant, and continue to serve patients and families.

■ **Glen B. Earl** is a leadership development consultant with Parkland Hospital in Dallas; glen.earl@phhs.org.



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