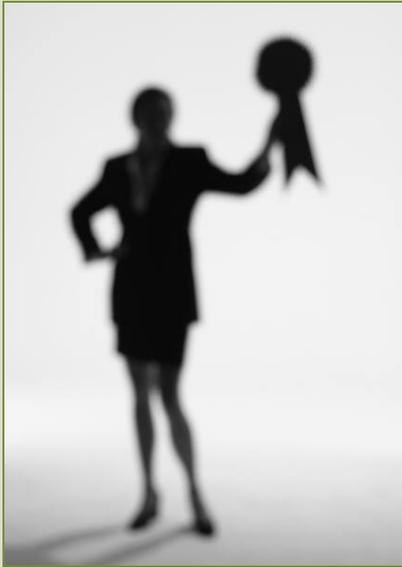


The Patient Experience Post

Healthcare's Resource for
Service Excellence
June 2007



Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

Engaging Employees: Three ingredients for building ownership

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Imagine yourself walking the hallways of your organization. You are immediately struck by a sense of welcome. You are proud to note that every employee you encounter is smiling and ready to go above and beyond to make sure their customers' needs are met. Even before you can make a request, someone steps in to welcome you and offer assistance. Your experience is comforting, reassuring, and noteworthy.

While this scenario may depict characteristics of your ideal workforce, chances are your actual team of employees spans the spectrum from inspired and enthusiastic to apathetic and disengaged. However, the simple truth is that a culture of service excellence starts with an internal culture of employee engagement. In many organizations, there is a core group of committed employees who are excited about delivering excellent service. The key is to spread that enthusiasm to the rest of the workforce. Short of cloning this small group of stellar performers, there are methods you can employ to foster a culture of excellence. You can begin this process by applying a few tried and true standards of employee engagement.

Standardization, Education, and Motivation

OhioHealth was named as one of Press Ganey's success stories in 2006. The system credits much of its success to standardization, education, and motivation. In spite of the fact that the system has five hospitals, OhioHealth was able to standardize its approach to customer service and make sure everyone was educated on the core elements, including standards, recognition, and innovation. Much of the motivation came down to the individual hospitals and pushed down into the individual departments.

Organizations that have realized the greatest success in achieving service excellence share several common denominators. Among the most important is engaging their employees. Three ways to engage employees include ownership, innovation, and communication.

1. Ownership and Standards

Is your organization's service excellence initiative gaining momentum from the top-down or from the bottom-up? If the answer is both, then you are headed in the right direction. One of the most basic tenets of employee engagement is that, when employees feel the initiative is truly theirs, they are more likely to buy into it for the long term.

Of course, you need leaders who make their expectations known and hold everyone accountable for living the mission, vision, and values. That top-down leadership is essential. But building a grassroots culture of service excellence needs to incorporate the employees' view of service excellence as well. In order to be successful, employees need to articulate standards that they can

live by. Begin by gathering a group of your stellar performers and charge them with the task of distinguishing those internal values that drive them to go above and beyond. Can they reasonably expect their co-workers to live by the same values? Are they able to clearly define these values for their co-workers? Once this group of stellar performers has worked out a set of service excellence standards, they can be the ones who begin talking to their co-workers on the subject.

It's important that employees understand that these standards were developed by their co-workers and not their supervisors, managers, or administration. It's easier to swallow when a co-worker says to you, "This is how I interact with my customers, do you think you'd be able to do the same thing?" than it is to hear a management mandate on "This is how you will act." Even if you already have standards established at the corporate level, you can engage your employees by having them define how the standards apply to their position and department.

In the ideal world, your employees will feel comfortable self-policing each other when it comes to adhering to service standards because they will feel like they own the entire process. Once your standards have been in place and employees are used to living by them, the challenge becomes maintaining their motivation to uphold the standards. Being empowered to hold each other accountable for their actions keeps those standards alive and in the forefront of employee consciousness. Some organizations have appointed a service champion in each department. This person helps to keep their peers enthusiastic about the standards and updated on any new changes in the service efforts.

Innovation and Ideas

Another way to increase employee ownership and engagement is to actively solicit and listen to their ideas for improvement. Everyone has an opinion and enjoys being asked to give it. Asking for employee ideas and opinions is a very easy way to increase involvement and open up the lines of two-way communication.

Employee input is invaluable in defining your culture of service excellence. Ask them how they would describe an ideal healthcare service experience, going into great detail about each step in the process.

After they've painted a very clear "ideal" picture, pose one more question: "What is it about working here that prevents you from delivering the ideal service that you've just described?" This is an effective method of uncovering your organization's inherent obstacles to service excellence. Soliciting employee feedback on how to overcome those obstacles will increase their level of engagement with the organization and will build credibility for any changes that need to be made in order to achieve the ideal environment.

Make sure to apply innovation concepts to improving patient satisfaction scores. SWAT teams comprised of staff members can lead change efforts in virtually every department. When staff have the authority to make changes,

they are more likely to take ownership and encourage their peers to stick with the changes.

In organizations that have already established a strong culture of service excellence, employee innovation and ideas are just as important as ever. Challenge employees to tie their improvement ideas to your core standards or patient satisfaction surveys. Reward them for their ideas that are implemented and continue to celebrate the fact that the employees are the ones who are driving the organization to excel.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

When it comes to creating a culture of engaged, enthused employees, there's no such thing as over-communicating. When you're at the point where you think you've truly communicated a message to death, it's just starting to be absorbed by your audience—so keep communicating!

Remember that communication includes listening. Once you have launched a service initiative, it is important to keep an ear to the ground for employee opinions. Conduct focus groups to gain employee feedback. Ask questions such as: Do the elements of the initiative have credibility among the staff? Is there consistency in how standards are being upheld within the departments? Are all departments encouraged to participate? Is it expected in some departments and ignored in others? Gaining feedback from employees allows you to make the necessary adjustments and redirect efforts when needed. Seeking feedback lets the employees know that their opinions are valuable and that they have a voice in the success of the organization.

Communication increases employees' sense of ownership. They need to hear and understand that their co-workers are generating ideas and being recognized for exceeding standards. They need to hear that action teams (SWATs) are led by staff members and are making a difference. Employees who get credit for their innovative ideas, participation on improvement teams, or recognition on patient satisfaction surveys are much more likely to continue their involvement and increase their level of engagement. Leaders need to take advantage of any opportunity they have to recognize their employees for involvement.

This is a great selling point for new employees too. New hires will be excited to hear from the organization's leadership that it's the frontline employees who drive the culture. Communication boosts your chances of receiving valuable feedback when asking for employee ideas. When they hear that a co-worker suggested a change and it was implemented, they'll feel like their ideas will be heard as well.

Communication is especially important when it comes to idea generation because the time gap between the time something was suggested and when it gets implemented can sometimes be considerable. So keep communicating every step of the way, even if it's to say that something was held up in construction but is still planned for implementation.

As your service excellence initiative matures, communication remains vital to maintaining and enhancing employee engagement. Communicate your patient satisfaction scores and solicit employee feedback on how to improve; communicate the compliments that your stellar performers have received and highlight how they are contributing to a culture of service excellence.

Your employees are your most valuable resource in building a culture of service excellence. Engaging them in a variety of ways throughout the process will ensure their full, voluntary buy-in and will bring you one step closer to the ideal environment where everyone delivers customer service above and beyond what is expected.

Learn more about ways you can ensure that all of your customer interactions, including over-the-phone interactions, support your healthcare organization's brand, as in [Living Your Brand Promise](#), featuring Kent Seltman, co-author of Management Lessons From Mayo Clinic. As the former Director of Marketing at Mayo Clinic, Seltman was charged with managing the brand for this world-renowned organization. During this 90-minute presentation, you'll hear about crucial elements in aligning the brand promise with the patient experience in order to build trust and credibility with customers. For only \$89, you'll receive all this: pre-session worksheets, a session workbook, webinar slides, and an audio CD of the 90-minute webinar, complete with the Q&A session.

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*Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000).*