

The Patient Experience Post

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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.

Four Secrets to Making Service Training Stick

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Providing an exceptional patient experience is at the top of most healthcare leaders' "to do" list these days and for many good reasons. First, caring for patients is what drew most of us into the profession. Second, it's simply the right thing to do. Finally, HCAHPS and Value Based Purchasing (VBP) have added financial accountability to the mix. If we can't provide solid service and positive outcomes, our reimbursement will be effected.

So, yes, service is a big deal.

Unfortunately, many organizations still struggle to provide good service consistently despite efforts to communicate with and train employees on the importance of great customer service.

In fact, we've found that training (or lack thereof) is often a root cause for the ineffectiveness of many service improvement efforts! It's not uncommon for us to run across organizations that tell us, "We've already done training, but nothing seems to stick." The problem is they've done training—maybe once, and maybe several years ago. A "one and done" approach is simply not enough to ensure ongoing service excellence.

One nurse leader recently lamented that their rounding training just didn't stick. When I delved further into their approach, I learned that the training was a twenty minute huddle. That's it. Culture wasn't created in 20 minutes, nor will it be permanently changed in 20 minutes.

Effective service training has to be done by design and it must be embedded into the culture of the organization. In reviewing the best success stories, we identified four steps they take to weave customer service training into the fabric of the culture. These include:

1) Start with the leaders.

Leaders should not only see the curriculum that the front line will be trained on, they should be adequately prepared to reinforce the training immediately following it, and on an ongoing basis. Leaders must understand why the training is taking place and how it aligns with the organization's strategy, mission, vision, and values. Further, they must be prepared to coach, mentor, model, and manage for the expected behaviors every day. The manager's role includes reinforcement and coaching to make the training stick and to have credibility. Having leaders who feel well prepared to coach on the key behaviors is essential.

One of the things that we do when we work with organizations is to practice coaching with leaders. We also ask them to identify some of the tough questions or situations that might arise in their departments that would cause some angst. It's important for them to verbalize their

fears about resistance. Then we help them walk through these situations. Preparing for these “what if” scenarios up front can help them gain focus, and the act of “rehearsing” a response prepares them for potentially real situations that may emerge. It helps them to stay on message with confidence.

2) Practice with real people!

Skill building is best done with live practice in an interactive manner and in an environment where attendees can get feedback. In a digital world, we’re often quick to assume that doing everything online is best. When it comes to this type of training, though, that’s not the case. Remember, we’re in a service-oriented, people-centered, business. We interact with patients when they are at their most vulnerable. To manage the interactions effectively we need to practice, in person, with real people. We need to become adept at reading nonverbal cues. We need to practice giving and receiving feedback. That doesn’t happen online. It is best learned through doing.

3) Make it personal.

One of the things that we try to bring out in our training classes is that we actually have people take time to do some personal reflection and share real life stories. This helps to bring out that connection to purpose that is so important, and so easy to lose sight of in our busy lives. In addition to storytelling, we give attendees a challenge; we ask them to think of one thing that they are going to do differently as a result of the training. We also tell them that their unit leader is going to be asking them about that personal commitment. Making it personal really takes the training from the head to the heart—it moves them from thinking about service concepts conceptually, to thinking about how they’re really going to put these behaviors into play with the customers they serve. Remember, not all employees have patients, but all of them have customers.

We encourage all unit managers to speak with staff after they attend the training to learn what change they are working on. In our [Power of One](#) training, we ask participants to map out their most common touch points with their customers in a typical interaction and then we ask them to raise the bar or create a “power move.” How can they take what they’re already doing and move it up a notch? What’s their power move? This gets everyone on board and builds energy and focus in a short period of time. When followed by consistent reinforcement in the department by managers, it creates a solid foothold that has meaning and resonance far beyond a single training session.

4) Deliver a bolus of training.

One of the challenges with training, especially when you want to move the needle, is the timing. When training hundreds or thousands of employees, it can take significant planning and organizing to get everyone through the training. Organizations that take a trickle approach, offering one or two classes at a time, and spreading the

training out over several months, risk losing precious momentum. Making the commitment and focusing on getting the training completed in a relatively short period of time creates a palpable shift in the organization. It's important to seize that opportunity and harness the momentum. This is much more likely when there is a massive dose delivered all at once.

Creating a consistently positive customer experience requires training that not only builds skills but engages staff in a strong connection to purpose. Everyone needs some early wins. Training, when done right, and reinforced by observant leaders, will support the early win.

A single training session won't get lasting results. What you must strive for is a culture shift—a culture focused on unwavering accountability for delivering exceptional patient experiences, every day, every time, with every encounter.

Phone communication is an essential part of the patient experience and is often the first part of the patient experience. In just seconds, your patients are deciding if you are friendly, knowledgeable, concerned, and willing to help. In fact, research shows that after just a 2-minute phone encounter, patients are clear about whether or not they would return to your organization or recommend it. Patients rely on phone encounters to make appointments and seek clinical advice. Other callers rely on phone encounters to gain vital information about a loved one. In both situations, it's important that you create a positive, trust-building experience. To engage your staff in essential phone skills, look toward the tips and tools in [You'll Have Them at "Hello": Phone skills that will WOW your callers every time](#). For only \$199, you'll receive the following: the video recording, presentation slides, a transcript of the recording, a participant guidebook, a moderator guidebook, a quality assurance tool, and additional handouts! This session is also available as a live training workshop.

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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). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.