

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.

Show You C.A.R.E.—engaging frontline employees in organizational culture

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

As you deliberately set out to create a culture of service excellence, you may find yourself encountering resistance. Your employees' abilities and desires to change are vital to the success of your organization; they are the ones with the closest contact with your customers on a daily basis.

Change can be difficult, and many people are opposed to any change that takes them out of their comfort zone. They have a stake in the status quo—it gives them a sense of security, and they take comfort in knowing the routine. If not managed well, they are likely to challenge any culture change as “just another administrative program” and feel as if they're being minimized for preferring to do things the way they have always been done.

Hardwiring culture change into your organization must include hardwiring that change in your frontline employees. They can make or break an organization's culture. Engaging them in that culture starts with showing that you C.A.R.E.

C = Communication

In the absence of concrete information, rumors abound and negative thought leaders are allowed to run amok. It's not surprising that most of the communication on the frontlines consists of, “Did you hear this?” or “I can't believe that!” Communication can make or break an organization's culture, especially during times of change. Frontline employees are frequently suspicious of change and often resort to the rumor mill for reassurance. Therefore, communication is the number one key to creating an unbreakable connection between employees and the organization's culture.

Communication begins with reiterating your organization's mission and vision. You can't repeat these cultural cornerstones enough. By saying it, you reinforce it in your own mind and ultimately become it. Your frontline employees take reassurance in the fact that the vision isn't some “flavor of the month” program and begin to believe in its possibilities.

But communication is a two-way street. Listening is even more important than your outbound messages. In order to build credibility, you must be willing to operate in an environment of transparency and be open to listening to stakeholder input. Hold employee forums at times and locations that are the most convenient for your employees and encourage frontline employees to ask the tough questions. Be prepared to give open, honest answers.

Open the lines of communication to each department through their informal thought leaders. Influential frontline employees can be great assets in linking their co-workers to the organizational culture, but only if they feel part of the change and understand how it will benefit them.

A = Accountability

In order to really move the culture, everyone must be accountable for his or her behavior. And as a leader, you have to be prepared to hold your staff accountable for behaving in accordance with the mission and vision. Consistency is the key to accountability. Many of us have worked with someone who has a victim mentality and feels put upon as if life isn't fair. If these types of employees see that everyone (from the housekeeper to the CEO) is held to the same standards, it reinforces the permanence of the culture change.

To ensure culture accountability, begin again with communication. Clearly communicate expectations for all employees at all levels. Translate how a culture standard applies to the day-to-day job. Verify that employees understand their role in bringing the culture to life.

Once you've verified what is expected, you can coach your employees to become more of a part of the culture. Give them examples of what your customers expect, use actual comments from patient feedback, and spell out specifically how employees should respond. Listen to your employees, as well. Your frontline employees have first-hand knowledge of customer reactions. They should feel comfortable letting you know if an expected response doesn't ring true with customers.

But listening to your employees' feedback doesn't mean letting them minimize or even dismiss the push toward a positive culture. They should be held accountable to the standards of behavior that support a culture of excellence. In addition they should have the opportunity to suggest changes to processes that will result in a better experience for patients. Employees who continue to scorn the culture to their customers or co-workers should be coached for improvement and disciplined if necessary. Other employees should be able to see that, in a culture of excellence, everyone is held accountable.

R = Rewards and Recognition

As you work to instill your culture in all levels of the organization, it is vital to recognize that it's not easy for everyone. For those frontline employees who prefer to cling to the way things have always been, acknowledge that change is difficult. Recognize those who are visibly working to incorporate the organization's culture into their daily work. Spotlight their efforts and publicly thank them.

There is an endless array of tactics that you can use to reward those frontline employees who are living the culture. It's not important how you choose to reward and recognize your employees; it's only important that you do it. When you recognize those on the frontline in a visible and public way, you demonstrate to their peers that the culture is an important organizational priority.

E = Environment of Innovation

One of the most effective tactics to help frontline employees feel connected to the organizational culture is through leadership embracing an environment of

innovation. You know that your frontline employees are the ones who are most closely connected to customers. Frontline employees see what frustrates patients during the registration process or see what makes a patient uncomfortable during an overnight hospital stay.

Encourage these frontline employees to speak up on behalf of their customers and offer their ideas for process improvement. Supporting their efforts at innovation is actually another form of public recognition and is one the strongest indicators to frontline employees that their contributions are an essential part of shaping the culture.

Many organizations implement an idea solicitation program where employees submit process improvement ideas based on their interactions with customers or their observations of organizational processes. Those employees who make the suggestions are subsequently involved in implementing the solutions. Employees who submit suggestions receive public acknowledgement of their ideas. Their co-workers see this as reinforcement of the culture. The more employees become involved in innovation programs, the more your culture will spread among frontline staff.

Frontline employees perform the bulk of the service. Oftentimes, they unconsciously set the cultural tone for the organization and get caught up in the status quo. Encouraging them to deliberately change the culture or enhance it in a new direction is challenging and may be met with resistance. But, if you take care in developing a culture of service excellence among those frontline employees, it will prove to be the most essential component to transforming the culture of your entire organization in the long run.

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).*