

The Patient Experience Post

Reflections from the Field
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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.

Communication

by Angela Fieler, MPA, CMQ/OE
Baird Group Consultant

I've been working in healthcare for a long time – 78% of my life, to be exact. And it seems, no matter what level of the organization I was working in or working with, there was an issue with communication. Specifically, employees of the organization complaining about how poorly leaders communicate with them. I'm sure you've heard statements in your organization like, "I didn't know that." or "No one told me that." or "They never tell us anything," To which you might respond, either in your head or out loud, "How could you possibly say no one told you that? I made an announcement at our last staff meeting, the CEO sent out an email, and there were posters near the time clocks and in the cafeteria."

Is there an organization out there where this scenario doesn't play out on a regular basis? Well, in every organization, there may always be a handful of people who don't "get the word", but they should be the exception rather than the rule. The reality is that organizations who communicate by design rather than by default are truly breaking down barriers to communication. They have figured out ways to ensure the people "hear" their messages by first, getting their attention, and second, speaking to their hearts.

These organizations are engaging in strategic communication. They are focused on their mission, vision, and values. They identify every key message tied to their plan to achieve their vision and they plan every communication in detail. These organizations begin by thinking through what needs to be communicated, who the target audience is, and how to best reach that audience. They not only know where their audiences naturally go for information but they have experimented with different communication channels and assessed their effectiveness based on both their objective and their target audience. They don't send out one memo and consider the job done.

In executing their strategic communication plan, these organizations recognize that leaders at all levels fall back on old communication habits and will benefit by developing new and more effective communication skills. Using a cascading technique, senior leaders are trained first in how to develop succinct, short messages or talking points. Then they take the message to their direct reports in an open forum. This open forum for leaders at the next level down, is an opportunity for them to ask questions, get clarification, and for senior leaders to validate that the message has been received. This process is repeated down the organization, either individually or in small groups until every person in a leadership position can explain the message clearly and succinctly. Leaders in

these organizations understand that it takes repetition and many channels to communicate effectively. Remember; no matter how many times you have repeated a key message, the fiftieth time may be the first time it resonates with the receiver.

Best practice organizations don't stop there. Leaders follow up on the message by talking with employees during rounds. They ask specific questions designed to validate that employees can clearly articulate the message. The best organizations track the employees' ability to recall the message and then these scores are used to determine the effectiveness of the delivery method employed. They build grids to capture their lessons learned in terms of what communication channels work best by target audience and the type of message being delivered. Most importantly, these organizations understand that while this type of strategic communication takes time, the return on that investment is immeasurable in terms of employee engagement.

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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.