

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.

Draw a Hard Line on Soft Skills for a Better Patient Experience

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

There is no doubt that healthcare employees need hard skills to deliver safe, reliable, high-quality medical care. But soft skills, the ones that engage patients and make them feel valued, respected and cared about, are frequently overlooked in the hiring process. Why? Because they are more difficult to assess than a list of certifications and degrees that assure technical skills.

What are soft skills?

When looking for a definition, there are dozens of them out there, but here are two that give clarity to the term.

The dictionary definition: Noun - personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.

Wikipedia defines soft skills as a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, career attributes, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence quotients.

Soft skills and the patient experience

There are several soft skills essential in delivering a positive patient experience. But they also come into play when employees define the characteristics they want in their co-workers. These include:

- Clear communication
- Listening skills
- Conflict resolution
- Empathy
- Self-control
- Assertiveness
- Focus
- Situational awareness
- Enthusiasm & Optimism
- Manners
- Friendliness
- Taking ownership and responsibility
- Depersonalization
- Sense of humor
- Teamwork
- Flexibility

Hiring for Soft Skills

Behavior-based interviews are a good way to flush out indications of soft skills but must be done in a way that helps you hire for fit without creating interview biases.

First, decide which soft skills are most essential to the role the candidate will be playing. Second, define what actual behaviors are good indicators of those skills. What cues will you be looking for?

For example, when hiring someone in registration at a busy medical practice or surgical center, you know they will need to make a great first impression. After all, they are frequently the first face a patient sees when entering the facility. You also know that they frequently handle difficult situations that can escalate quickly.

In this situation, one question can reveal several soft skills at once. But make sure to listen with your eyes as well as your ears to pick up on non-verbal cues that the words aren't matching the emotions. Try this. "Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult patient situation." This one request allows you to look for evidence of listening skills, empathy for the patient's situation, self-control, manners, conflict resolution, and ownership.

Training soft skills

Healthcare organizations can, and should, train for soft skills. This requires putting thought into how your stated values are demonstrated during daily operations. What do the values in action look like? These behaviors can be defined and set as expectations. Once they are in place, with training aligned, employees feel confident that they know what is expected of them.

Training takes some of the subjectivity out of the "soft" part of soft skills. When leaders define specific behaviors that are expected of everyone, they are no longer soft, fluffy, nebulous terms, the skills become an expectation – your standard of care.

[Find out how](#) Baird Group can help you draw a hard line on soft skills. We'll help you create the standards, train, and validate results.

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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.