



Service Strategies

*Health Care's Resource for
Service Excellence*

May 2010



Lead, Follow – or Get Out of the Way!

By Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Health care organizations are beginning to embrace the concept of a Chief Experience Officer – an individual responsible for ensuring service excellence throughout the organization. While I can see the merit in having a position like this, and it makes sense to establish clear accountability, simply anointing this new type of “CEO” is not enough to make exceptional service happen.

The key to success is in making sure everyone knows what is expected of them, that everyone is accountable for meeting those expectations and that no one is exempt from performing. If you aren’t leading this effort, you must be following. If you aren’t leading OR following, you need to get out of the way.

In order to create a consistently positive patient experiences, service-centeredness needs to exist at all levels of the organization – from the top to the front lines. But making a broad statement like “everybody is responsible for delivering great customer service” can be too simplistic.

There are actual duties associated with building a culture of excellence which can be more clearly defined based on the position an employee holds within the organization – from staff to supervisor to manager to direct to senior leader.

In our work with health care organizations, we help our clients learn what it takes to lead, follow or get out of the way. First we help them to quantify and operationalize the responsibilities required at each level of the organization.

In my book ***Raising the Bar on Service Excellence*** I created a table to illustrate how this works. I’ve included an abbreviated version of the table on the next page.

Raising the Bar on Service Excellence

This 5-part series is now available as a packaged, turn-key self study. Step by Step is an action-packed, thought-provoking tutorial designed to inspire and develop the leader within. You'll get the five 90-minute recorded web seminars, partnered with pre and post-session activities.

Participants are guided through a step by step approach for raising the bar on service excellence. This curriculum was developed in conjunction with the recently released *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Healthcare Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice*. **Order online now!**

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The Baird Difference

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

Visit www.baird-consulting.com.

Your Responsibilities as a Health Care Leader

| Senior Leaders | Directors | Managers | Supervisors | Staff |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Create and communicate clear vision for service excellence. | Plan and direct business units to meet and exceed customer expectations. | Keep customer service initiatives visible in the department. | Incorporate service standards in training and coaching. | Take responsibility for learning and applying the service standards in all encounters. |
| Tie service to strategic plan and establish clear accountability. | Understand customer service from the stakeholder perspective. Use metrics for accountability. | Acquire patient satisfaction data, complaints and recommendations – use to improve department processes. Share metrics and hold staff accountable for meeting or exceeding goals. | Help others to understand and apply service standards in customer interactions. Model service behaviors. | Participate in service improvement and training activities. |

Using this model, staff need to focus on the items in their column, while senior leaders have responsibility for everything in their column as well as accountability for everything to the right in the chart. The further left you move on this table, the broader your area of responsibility. As your role expands, so do your service-leader responsibilities! Like frontline staff, supervisors need to master the standards themselves, but must also be adept at coaching and modeling the service behaviors. Managers and directors take on those tasks as well while also holding their teams accountable for meeting or exceeding established goals.

It is true that we are *all* responsible for delivering exceptional service – but the depth and breadth of that responsibility varies by your position in the organization. We find that this is where many organizations get stuck. They may get as far as establishing standards, and expect that to be the answer. If you are a leader, you need to be clear about what role you play in creating a culture of service excellence. If you are a frontline staff member, you need to know what role you are expected to play.

One thing we all share responsibility for, though, is recognizing when we may be contributing to a decline in service excellence. We need to lead, follow – or get out of the way!

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WANT TO USE THIS ARTICLE IN YOUR E-ZINE, NEWSLETTER OR WEB SITE? You may, as long as you include the following statement:

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* (2008, Golden Lamp Press), *Reclaiming the Passion- Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (2004, Golden Lamp Press), *Customer Service In Healthcare; A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (2000 Jossey Bass).

Scenario #1 – you're the problem.

Each of us knows deep down, when things just aren't feeling "right." We can tell when our personal goals, motivations and beliefs just don't seem aligned with where our organizations are heading. Have you ever felt that way? It's not uncommon. What *is* uncommon, though, is taking steps to do something about it. When the culture at your organization is moving – but you're not (or not in the same direction), it may be time to ask yourself if you're still a good fit. If not, it may be time for you to move on.

I remember having an encounter with a long term employee a few years ago when I was leading the organization's service initiative. This individual let me know that she'd "seen programs come and go, administrators come and go, and she could outlast all of them." What she hadn't experienced, however, was a leadership team who was willing to stay the course. Nor had she experienced seeing her peers change around her. After about a year she came back and said to her manager in defeat, "This just isn't going away, is it?" Not long after that, and to her manager's delight, she resigned.

Scenario #2 – you manage the problem.

One of the greatest challenges we face as health care leaders is not the people we hire, but the people who are already there (who have, perhaps, been there too long). We know who they are – they're the ones who don't want to change, even as the world changes around them. Sometimes (as in the scenario above) these people are very strong clinicians and we're hesitant to lose them. But, we need to weigh the value they provide clinically with the damage they may do from a service perspective – to patients, to staff and to the reputation of our organizations. And then we need to act. If they don't resign, we need to help them get out of the way of progress.

One of the partners we work with to deliver our **Patient Experience Boot Camp** is **Beryl Companies**, a firm that provides outsourced call center services for health care organizations that has been recognized as one of the Top 100 Places to Work in Health Care by *Modern Healthcare* in 2008 and 2009. Beryl prides itself on being "slow to hire and quick to fire." It's a strategy that works for them – and could work for all of us. And, if we truly *are* slow – and thoughtful in our hiring, we should not *need* to be quick to fire. That's the point.

If you're a leader, be crystal clear about what you want your culture to be and quantify the responsibilities required to achieve that vision. If you represent frontline staff, commit to upholding your organization's standards during every encounter with every customer every day.

Organizations that achieve these two things are in a much stronger position to hire others who are a good fit. It's not a simple undertaking – but it's an important one. Next month we'll take a look at how you can take steps to incorporate culture-based hiring criteria into your recruitment, orientation and assessment processes.