Counteracting the High Cost of Low Morale in the Health Care Sector

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Low workplace morale is increasingly costly and is affecting organizations across many industries, particularly the health care industry. This article provides background information on the unique challenges faced by leadership and employees in health care. It explains how to align employees with the goals of the organization and provides readers with the tools that organizations can integrate to instill cultural change and improve professionalism, effectiveness, and accountability in all areas of the organization. Key words: Morale, Motivation, Professional presence

HEALTH CARE IS an industry that, by its very nature, operates in a constant state of change and in a constant state of stress as well. Scientific and technological medical advances, although positive, require continuous education and adjustments. Insurers jockey to position themselves advantageously, often requiring new pretreatment justifications, permissions, and reporting procedures. The Affordable Care Act is the latest and most far-reaching change coming from the ever-changing political realm. And all of the attendant stresses are magnified by the aging of the population and the current economic malaise.

Navigating the shape-shifting health care environment often results in overwork, poor communication, and low morale. Low morale is becoming an increasingly costly and risky proposition for hospital and health care administrators across the United States. The Gallup Organization estimates that actively disengaged workers cost the economy $350 billion per year in lost productivity, including the effects of absenteeism, illness, and a decrease in productivity and professionalism. The health care industry offers an even bleaker picture, with some hospitals experiencing an exodus of employees owing to plunging morale.

GROWING PAINS FOR HEALTH CARE COMPANIES

Large health care institutions, such as Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas, are undergoing a cultural shift that can be painful in the short-term but will ultimately result in a healthier hospital and, therefore, healthier patients in the long run. To come into compliance with federal standards, Parkland has made drastic changes in workplace expectations and guidelines. Because of these changes, Parkland has been faced with an exodus of hospital workers, making their nursing vacancy rate almost 3 times higher than it was 1 year previously, according to an article in The Dallas Morning News. Overall, the institution will fare better without those departed workers on the roster. However, the more difficult challenge is improving the morale of the remaining employees at a time when they are overworked and learning how to comply with new standards and regulations. According to Dr Thomas Royer, Parkland’s interim chief executive officer, “You can’t create the ideal patient experience when you have unhappy workers. I’ve got to have a staff that’s motivated.”
RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF LOW MORALE

Because morale is a group dynamic that is affected by each individual group member, it waxes and wanes almost imperceptibly. The larger the health care institution, the longer it may take to recognize shifts in employee engagement. The first step in combatting low morale is recognizing its existence. The most telling signs of low morale can be discerned using the organization’s metrics showing the following:

- Increased patient complaints
- High absentee rate
- Excessive employee complaints over small matters
- Increased employee conflicts
- Higher error rate and poor work quality
- High employee turnover

IMPROVING MORALE

In addition to the inherent changes and stresses that are occurring in health care, morale can be negatively impacted by elements that are controllable, including lack of opportunity for professional growth, poor management communication, and rigid working conditions, all of which can be related to ineffective leadership styles and competencies.

The rapid changes occurring in the health care industry have resulted in changed roles within organizations. Many physicians are assuming greater business and management responsibilities, and this trend is expected to continue. Although they may be highly qualified physicians, they are not always capable managers and leaders. Their lack of confidence in their own management and leadership skills is exacerbated by the staff morale problems already being experienced in hospitals and health care facilities in recent years.

Studies have shown that high morale, as measured by workforce engagement, correlates with patient safety, quality, outcomes, and patient satisfaction. Some proactive health care organizations have looked to the management practices of other industries to help in turning the tide of decreased morale and lagging productivity standards by integrating highly focused, practical employee development and leadership programs into their workplace culture.

According to 1 director of training,

Some of our hallmark employee development programs include courses that address increasing personal effectiveness and developing a professional presence. These programs are specifically designed to instill a new or renewed sense of accountability and professionalism. Many employees, after attending these programs, start to ask themselves whether they are in the ‘right’ spot— wondering if they are working in the ‘right’ positions. That kind of self-questioning is healthy because those people are likely not working up to their productivity potential. However, they can be guided toward something that works better for them and they can be retrained for positions where they will work to capacity because they will embrace new roles that are more suited to them.

Employees who take a second look at their current jobs as a result of the training they receive may have been average or good employees before retraining, but they can be turned into star players by attending appropriate courses and receiving the tools they need to embrace their next positions or career levels. Programs that bring issues of accountability and personal effectiveness into the forefront encourage employees to feel that they have more control over their daily work life and career in general.

According to Lauren Smith, Organizational Development Consultant at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center,

Employees can still make effective choices, even in poor environments. If they no longer can do that, then it’s time to move them into a new environment. We have found that integrating programs focusing on an expectation of continual improvement in effectiveness and professionalism brings accountability into the story, because employees begin to feel empowered, and that’s better for everyone.
FOCUSING ON CORE SKILLS

Successful employee training programs identify and focus on core employee competencies that are most effective and transferrable out of the classroom and into the workplace. These include learning to manage one’s own performance, becoming familiar with what affects the motivations and performance of oneself and others, becoming enthusiastic about individual accountability and engagement, understanding behavioral styles, building professional competencies, and establishing a language for effectively handling difficult or uncomfortable situations in the workplace.

In the words of Gillian Landgraff, staff trainer at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta,

Sophisticated communication skills are imperative in our environment. Our employees need to communicate consistently and effectively with families and coworkers, who are either performing in a tense environment or feel vulnerable because they are handling the health issues of themselves or their family member. Tools that give employees the knowledge they need about their own motivations and behavioral style lead to an ability to flex their own style, regardless of the situation.

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE: OBSERVED CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE

Successful development programs that increase employee effectiveness and improve professional presence will result in observable change in the workplace. What kinds of observed behaviors should health care organizations expect from their employee development programs?

They should expect an immediate and noticeable difference in the tools their employees use for effective communication and for handling difficult situations. There should also be a noticeable increase in accountability, for both themselves and their colleagues. Moreover, leadership should be able to identify those employees who have attended the programs, as they will be the employees who regularly step up the quality and accountability in their work. Here is 1 example of an observable valuable change, from a nurse in clinical informatics:

I have been using some of the strategies here at the office park. In particular, I have become more aware of other styles and have been adapting my approach. I have one co-worker who is very talkative in the morning and I know that if I want to be able to get to the work piece, I need to have the social conversation first. Another co-worker is exactly the opposite and in that case, I plan what I need to say and questions I have, and then get straight to the point. I really feel like I have gotten better results because of the changes. I use this at home too! I have found it very helpful with dealing with my family and friends.

Core skills of professionalism and personal effectiveness are often overlooked or minimized, and yet once people have been given the opportunity that these programs provide, they become the star players on their team, floor, or in their department—invaluable members of the health care microcosm.

INSTILLING A CULTURAL SHIFT

Workplace development courses can result in the kind of cultural shift that relieves stress and presses the reset button on departments and entire organizations. Employees become aware of their own behavioral styles and gain an understanding of their own motivations as well as the motivations of their colleagues, and they learn how to use that knowledge, learn the skills needed to handle workplace changes in a constructive way, and enjoy the rewards of affecting positive change in their surroundings.

Once employee development programs that focus on positive accountability have been implemented, not only is there a cultural shift and greater focus on the organizational mission, but also, patients will feel it, the staff will become more loyal, and the job of emerging leadership will become smoother because everyone learns to take greater personal responsibility for their own influence in the workplace.