

Cultural Transformation at a Major Hospital

Methodist Hospital, Houston, TX

This Top 100 Hospital in the United States is not only attracting patients, The Methodist Hospital is also attracting leaders from other hospitals around the world to understand a new cure for traditional ills that deeply challenge many health care organizations and the entire system.

SITUATION

Rated as one of the “Top 100” hospitals in the United States, The Methodist Hospital is a Christian organization established by the United Methodist Church. This four-hospital system in the Houston area has over 9,000 employees, including hospital and corporate staff. As a faith-based hospital, the concept of spiritual caring has always been an integral part of its existence and operations.

In 1997, the board members of The Methodist Hospital in Houston, Texas committed to revitalizing the mission of the organization with a renewed focus on creating a spiritual caring environment, and they wanted to make it measurable. Achieving this goal became a truly transforming exercise for all facets of the hospital’s operations.

Using a Cultural Values Assessment, The Methodist Hospital has experienced an unprecedented cultural change that is bringing its vision of spiritual caring to reality – with quantifiable benefits to employee satisfaction, patient care, health and safety, and the bottom line.

THE CHALLENGE

According to Cindy Vanover, Project Director of Spiritual and Values Integration, defining the difference between one’s perception of spiritual caring and the reality is something that is not easily measured. “How can you know if you have a spiritual environment of caring?” she asks. “What does it look like? We had come up with a mission statement. But how do you measure its impact? If you can’t measure it, then you don’t really know if it exists. That’s when we started looking for a way to measure it.”

The Cultural Values Assessment provided quantifiable mapping of the gaps that existed between personal, current and desired cultural values. While this provided an all important baseline, the real value says Vanover is that the results from the survey

provided a tangible path they could follow. “Once the first value survey was done, the next step was understanding what to do about it. There is no point measuring something if you don’t do anything with the information you are given. The words selected by survey participants have special meaning. We need to unlock that meaning, share it with all parts of the hospital so common understanding and definitions emerge. Collaboration on values-based behaviors and attitudes, as well as performance benchmarks, gives clear focus and direction to ensure alignment.”

“While it’s easy to implement change where there is a close match between personal and desired cultural values, the real challenge is working on those areas where they don’t match,” she adds. “Working toward matching values is critical. Where a person’s values match your organization’s, you have a happier, more productive environment. Where they are exceedingly different, people are miserable.”

STRATEGY

Following the results of the Cultural Values Assessment, The Methodist Hospital began developing programs to integrate further the five core values into the hospital’s value system. This included the creation of training & leadership development programs on the core values for all staff – an initiative that continues to be part of all new employee orientation.

Extensive effort was put into clarifying and integrating definitions of the core values for the different units within the operation. This entailed a workgroup commitment process in which every unit, under the leadership of its manager, engaged in team meetings devoted to generating value definitions. Posters were created for team members to include specific behaviors in their daily work life that would demonstrate that value. Coaching the teams and managers through this process was implemented.

“It was a way to help them – and us - understand what our values really looked like,” says Vanover. “How would you know respect was there, for example? We realized that every unit had its own personality, so what demonstrates respect for a biomedical engineer for example may not be the same as for a nurse or an accounts payable person. We wanted individual teams to come up with their own agreed upon behavior plan to demonstrate their commitment to each value.”

Since the first value survey, The Methodist Hospital revisits the process annually. With each iteration of the survey, the hospital can not only monitor improvements in the cultural value gaps, but also drill deeper into specific departmental issues as the project evolves. The Cultural Values Assessment gives words that people can use to describe their reality--words that can lead to a stronger mutual understanding.

RESULTS

Now that the process has become an integral part of the hospital's culture, Vanover says the board members and leaders have seen a number of tangible benefits. These include:

- Improved worker and patient health and safety
- Happier staff
- Reduced number of errors
- Better access to training talent

All of this translates in cost savings and greater efficiency. In addition, the survey results are used to conduct behavioral-based interviewing to ensure that new hires are aligned with the cultural values.

Also, research tells us that if employees are happy, so are the patients. There is a very strong correlation between the two. And that ultimately translates into bottom line benefits. Measurable improvements due to the cultural values work include:

- Reduced staff turnover from 24 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2004, a 38% decline.
- Hospital bed vacancy rates went from 6.7 percent to 3.1 percent over the same period.

Future plans include additional coaching of managers and directors based on the values assessment drilldown, continuation of aligning HR processes with values for the entire employee life cycle, and engaging physicians, medical students and residents. Leadership development plans are aligned with the cultural values as well.

Vanover says the key to the success is the buy-in of the executive team. "Not only do our employees take part every year, but so do our board of directors and CEO council. They continue to provide budget support and encourage everyone to take part, including participating in new employee orientation sessions. People have keen radar and can tell the difference between slapping up a poster as part of a public relations program and what people really care about and mean."

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