

MOHEG Student Essay Award

Keys to Physician Engagement

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Introduction

Physician burnout is a hot topic in the healthcare literature today and for a good reason. According to an article in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 2012, over one half of physicians in the United States have symptoms of burnout characterized by a “loss of enthusiasm for work, feelings of cynicism, and a low sense of personal accomplishment. (Boone et al, 2012, p. 1377) Physicians with burn out are impaired physicians and can have a higher rate of medical errors so burnout becomes an issue that impacts the quality of health care. (Kabcenell et al, 2016) It is interesting to look at physician engagement as the opposite of physician burnout as well its solution. Lee Ann Jarousee writes “Physician engagement today means organizing care around the patient. It means working in teams. It means embracing the bigger mission of the organization. “(Jarousee, 2014) Physician engagement means physicians who are invested in their own high quality of practice as well as their organization and its mission. No health care organization will be capable of implementing the strategy needed to succeed with transformation of care without physician engagement.

The Cost of Low Physician Engagement

Lack of physician engagement is costly on multiple levels. In 2013, the average physician turnover rate was reported at 6.8%. (Flatt, 2014) The physician turnover rate at my organization in 2016 was up to 10.7%. It is thought that the cost to replace one physician can be over \$500,000 (Smith, 2014) implying that the cost to my organization could be over twenty million dollars last year. Stark and Whitlock write, “An effective strategy for physician

engagement can help systems retain and attract top talent and also facilitate their engagement with quality and cost factors of health care reform.” (Stark & Whitlock, 2014, p. 8) With reimbursement now reflecting bundled payments and value based purchasing, it is critical to have physicians engaged in improving quality and efficiency of care or the organization’s financial performance will be impacted. Finally, poor physician engagement and morale impacts the morale of the entire organization which considerable evidence suggests negatively impacts the entire performance including the financial performance of the organization. Health care organizations cannot afford an unengaged medical staff.

Engagement and the Physician’s Mindset

It is important to understand that the key to improving physician engagement is understanding physician culture. Dr. John Byrnes writes, “Your road to physician engagement starts with learning about physician culture. By culture I mean their norms, their values and what’s important to physicians as a group.” (Byrnes, 2015, p. 40) He discusses the seventeen characteristics of physician culture in Table 1 that is included in the appendix of this paper. First on the list is that physicians put the welfare of the patient above all else. This element of culture is extremely important in the need for physicians to be personally involved in quality improvement. In my organization, the medical staff was recently sent the new clinical pathway for pain control using opiates. There was no mention of who was involved in the development of the pathway or the evidence behind the pathway. Certainly, without any involvement in the development of a clinical pathway or order set, physicians will not be engaged in the

implementation of the pathway or order set. Physicians want to be involved which is #9 in the list. #15 on the list is that physicians are 'evidenced based' so showing them a pathway to implement without providing them with the evidence to support the pathway is problematic.

Lee Ann Jarousse writes, "Physicians want to have a seat at the table. They want to be included in the conversation and be part of the decision-making process." (Jarousse, 2014, p. 41) Finally, it is important to note that physicians are different from other employees and not recognizing this will stifle engagement. Two of the most important characteristics of physician culture are that physicians embrace teamwork (#5) but see themselves as captains of the ship. (#3) To realize the true potential of the physician and foster their engagement, each physician needs to be empowered to personally lead. Physicians have to believe that they can individually make a difference and are personally valued by their organization or they will disengage. Understanding this unique culture of physicians is crucial to physician engagement.

Quality Improvement

A great place to start in improving physician engagement is to involve physicians in all aspects of quality improvement. Dr. Byrnes writes, "Physician engagement is critical to your success as a quality leader. This is because physicians influence 85 percent of patient outcomes due to decisions they make and the orders they write." (Byrnes, 2015, p. 40) The Mayo Clinic has developed The Quality Academy where multidisciplinary teams with physician leaders have now worked more than 6000 quality improvement projects. (Kabacoff et al, 2016) We know that there is tremendous opportunity to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of

care delivery and physicians are key to identifying these opportunities. Physicians have to be engaged to work the improvements. Dye writes, “Physicians know firsthand what quality looks like, and if you help them become leaders, then we will see true transformation in healthcare.” (Dye, 2016)

Physicians as Leaders

Physician engagement grows directly with physician leadership from the top tier of the organization to the individual physician level. Dr. Henson writes, “Choose leaders with great care and ensure that these leaders attend to the professional needs of those they lead.” (Henson, 2016, p. 88) Many organizations including my own have placed physicians in leadership roles and have embraced leadership training programs. Physician leadership does not ensure physician engagement as seen in my organization with a 10.7% turnover rate in 2016. The right physician leader who understands and is respectful of the unique culture of physicians can certainly help turn the corner and improve physician engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, physician burnout is the result of low physician engagement and finding the key to improving physician engagement is essential to the endurance of the individual physician but also to the success of the health care organization. Without physician engagement and active involvement in new initiatives surrounding the transformation of health care, healthcare organizations will have very little chance of success. Physician engagement is now and always has been an essential.

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Appendix

TABLE 1 //////////////////////////////////////
17 CHARACTERISTICS OF PHYSICIAN CULTURE

ATTRIBUTES OR CHARACTERISTICS OF PHYSICIAN CULTURE	
1.	Welfare of patients is always top of mind.
2.	Quality of care is paramount.
3.	Physicians perceive themselves as captains of the ship.
4.	Physicians are independent and autonomous.
5.	Teamwork is fine, but physicians are in charge.
6.	Physicians learned from a master.
7.	Physicians are problem solvers.
8.	They are incredibly competitive.
9.	Physicians love to be involved.
10.	They do not tolerate embarrassment.
11.	They are taught to be aggressive.
12.	Physicians are born with strong egos.
13.	They enjoy lively debates.
14.	Physicians are data-driven.
15.	They are evidence-based.
16.	Physicians want a functional, efficient workshop.
17.	Health care is a caste system, and you must be part of the club.

