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5 Ways to Put Meaning Behind Your Hospital's 'Mission, Vision and Values'

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Defining your hospital's 'mission, vision and values' can boost employee engagement, encourage participation in hospital initiatives and send a clear message to the community about your direction. Unfortunately, many hospital executives fail to make these concepts part of hospital operations, and employees are unable to name a single 'value' that their organization claims to prioritize. Paul Spiegelman, founder and CEO of the patient experience company Beryl, discusses five ways hospitals can use their core values to guide decision-making throughout the facility.

1. Prioritize the development of core values.

Mr. Spiegelman says that in the busy world of healthcare, the definition and application of core values often gets buried under a mass of other tasks. When a hospital CEO is handling pending cuts in reimbursement, regulatory requirements, ACO formation and the demands of a union, "defining core values" can easily slip down the priority list. He admits that when he was first introduced to the concept of "core values" early in his career, he dismissed it as a fluff concept that leaders used to beautify the company website or hospital waiting area. While a hospital could easily produce a plaque for the CEO's wall that spelled out the organization's mission, he doubted that those principles would actually be applied throughout the facility. Over time, he came to understand that mission, vision and values do not simply reflect employee behavior at a hospital — they drive it.

"I would say we're doing this backwards," he says. "We're trying to push practices down the throats of our employees that will get us a better score [on a regulatory report card], but the practices don't necessarily jive with our organization if we don't have a clear set of vision and

values." He says the priorities on a CEO's top 10 list — cost-cutting initiatives, physician integration, meaningful use of EMR — can be accomplished much more easily if the hospital starts by building a culture of engagement. If every employee can name the hospital's mission and discuss how his or her role contributes to that mission, staff members will be more engaged in hospital initiatives, and they are more likely to achieve their goals.

2. Involve employees in defining your vision.

If your hospital has not already established its core values — or if you feel your core values don't represent what your organization stands for — put together a task force of employees to redefine your vision.

Mr. Spiegelman says your hospital's vision can be divided into three parts:

- **Your purpose: How you make the world a better place.**
- **Your values: The behaviors you hold yourselves to that will not change, no matter what else changes around you.**
- **Your plans for the future: What your organization will look like several years down the road.**

In order to define these three concepts, you need to sit down with your employees and ask for their input. "Make it an inclusive exercise with a cross-section of members of the organization," says Mr. Spiegelman. "By being inclusive, employees feel that they're part of the solution, not that they're just being given the answer." You may also discover that the views of the hospital

leadership do not match the views of the employees, signaling a problem for employee engagement. Hospital leadership and staff members should be in agreement about the purpose and values of the organization, or system-wide initiatives will fail because employees feel misrepresented.

3. Keep your core values short and accessible.

Your core values should be brief, Mr. Spiegelman says. Create four to five core values, and limit each value to four to five words. Limiting your word count will make your values easy to memorize and cite. For example, The Beryl Companies lists “never sacrificing quality” among its core values. The statement is short and memorable, and employees should find it relatively easy to employ in their everyday work. “We might be looking to take on an unusual request from a client, and someone will raise their hand and say, ‘By taking on this project, are we sacrificing quality?’” Mr. Spiegelman says.

He also recommends making your core values accessible to employees throughout your campus; The Beryl Companies wrote their core values on the walls of the building, but there are many different ways to spread the word. Post the core values in every employee bathroom on your campus, or ask your staff to wear name tags that display the values. Make sure the values are well-known around your hospital, rather than just a corporate exercise that starts and ends in the C-suite.

4. Talk about your mission, vision and values on a regular basis.

Once you have established your mission, vision and values, they should come up in meetings on a regular basis, Mr. Spiegelman says. “We start all of our group meetings by talking about the core values,” he says. “Every time I have a town hall meeting, it starts by testing new employees and saying, ‘Can you tell me about the core values?’” The values are also referenced in daily decision-making. If one of your core values is “do the right thing,” employees should discuss their work habits with supervisors to make sure they are prioritizing “the right thing” over time constraints, finances and other limitations.

Mr. Spiegelman says this behavior starts with the hospital CEO. If hospital leadership regularly refers to the organization’s mission, vision and values in meetings, memos, internal newsletters and campus-wide emails, employees will catch on and start doing the same. Culture is contagious, so start promoting your core values as soon as they are developed.

5. Adhere to your core values over time.

“Your values should not change every year,” Mr. Spiegelman says. When you develop your mission, vision and values, make sure you are developing a set of concepts that will apply to your organization long-term. If you want employees to take your core values seriously, you should stick by them despite changes to the industry. “They literally don’t change once you set them up, but you can add to them because they become part of the code of conduct for how the company operates,” he says. Employees who start working at your hospital today should live by the same set of values as employees you hire 20 years from now; this continuity will give your staff a sense of community over time and the feeling that they are working towards a common, unwavering goal.