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Overcoming Barriers to Becoming a High-Performing Leader: *How to Improve Communication and Accountability*

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My leadership presentation at the annual ASHE Leadership Institute, enabled by Knowledge Exchange sponsor Johnson Controls, included a quick poll of the attendees. The poll revealed that the top two barriers to becoming a high performing leader are challenges with communication and accountability. These attendees and leaders want to focus on the skills needed to effectively develop themselves, and their employees, to have more meaningful, outcomes-based dialogue with senior executives. And why shouldn't they?

Our work is tough, but most of us are motivated because we have the privilege of helping people when they are at their most vulnerable, perhaps when they have even given up hope. And often in the world of ancillary and support services, the individuals of these departments may not be in direct contact with patients, but each patient experience is directly affected by the work of ancillary and support services.

Understanding organizational goals and translating them into meaningful targets for departments and staff is a significant, yet imperative, undertaking for ancillary leaders. When staff goals are aligned and measurable results are linked to improved patient outcomes, there is a quantifiable contribution to the patient-centered experience. Leaders have then enhanced their ability to take a seat at the decision-making table with senior leaders since their work of ancillary and support services directly contributes to safety, quality, cost-savings and the overall core business of the organization.

There are four key steps to becoming a high-performing leader.

- Make the connection
- Know "the whats"
- Enforce "the hows"
- Become indispensable

Step 1: Make the connection

Consider a visit to a Texas hospital, where more than one million patient meals are served every year. How important is food service? Without nourishment, patients will not recover. AND, the food must be nutritious - prepared according to specific dietary standards. There's no question that at this and every hospital, the dietary line cook is as important as the nurse at the bedside. So, now imagine an operating room without lights. How effective will the surgical team be? Yet skilled facilities staff change thousands of light bulbs every year at hospitals across the country. And patients have life-saving surgeries.

It's the leader's job to recognize the importance of the role, and how you make a difference in the continuum of care. Then, you must communicate this with the people

you lead openly and consistently. Does your staff know their purpose? When they come to work every day, do they believe they are touching the lives of patients and their families?

A reporter covering a story at NASA was roaming the state-of-the-art facility marveling at the achievements of the American space program. As he walked down the hall, he came across a worker, a nondescript man who happened to be sweeping up a spill from the floor. Since the reporter had interviewed famous astronauts and scientists that day, he was curious about the man and his simple job. He stopped to say hello. During the exchange of pleasantries, the reporter politely inquired, "So what do you do here at NASA?" The janitor replied, "I put men on the moon." His job was mission critical, and he learned that from his leader. In health care, every job is mission critical.

Your employees want to feel like they matter, and high performers lead with accountability and open communication.

Step 2: Know "The Whats"

First, leaders must set clear expectations and goals that are connected to patient outcomes, and then evaluate performance accordingly. At Baptist Leadership Group, the partners we work with have learned to focus on balanced performance using the framework of the five 'Pillars' – People, Service, Quality, Financial and Growth.

The Plant Operations Team established their goals in alignment with the hospital-wide goals, and the patient experience at the center of their work. The goals connect to purpose and importance by linking to patient satisfaction and quality outcomes, which ultimately impact financial performance. Every job is mission critical!

People	Service	Quality	Financial	Growth
High retention rate (low turnover)	World-class rankings on our patient satisfaction survey for cleanliness, customer service and room maintenance	All rooms cleaned to established quality standards	Compliance with established budget	Annual goal
Percentage positive morale		High performance on Safety Survey		
Employee engagement through idea submission				

With measureable goals established, performance is evaluated based on the actions and behaviors required to accomplish the objectives. It is incumbent upon leaders to then develop and mentor the high performers, and provide consequences for under-performers who do not meet their goals.

Step 3: Enforce "The Hows"

At Baptist Hospital, every week the support services team conducts interdisciplinary 'rounding' on internal customers of ancillary and support services. Directors from environmental services, plant operations, dietary and materials, safety and the COO purposefully round together on nursing, lab and other key clinical customers. Why? It's a great opportunity for the leaders in these departments to harvest the "wins." Rounding also helps the leader to be proactive by assessing needs and levels of service. Rounding observations are taken back to individual departments and result in reward and

recognition of staff as well as actionable steps to improve service to staff and patients. Many of the staff in facilities and plant operations may not be the highest paid, but that does not mean they should be the least rewarded.

Why is this important? High patient-satisfaction scores, which are now openly available to the market, are a key driver of the perception of quality and customer service for hospitals. Empowered healthcare consumer, and often their physicians, are accessing this data to make care decisions. Even among the *best-of-the-best* top 5 percent of hospitals, performance on HCAHPS (the only national survey measuring patient perceptions) revealed only 85 percent of patients report “Always” for experiencing a clean room and bathroom during their hospital stay. Among *all* hospitals, only 69 percent of patients report “Always.” Think about how many employees drive this data point -- lighting, decor, TV, telephone, plumbing, housekeeping, maintenance, HVAC and the list goes on. In high-performing hospitals, the employees’ ability to impact the patient experience, quality outcomes and the bottom line are publicly acknowledged highlights.

Among the five pillars, leaders are also mindful of quality. For example, hospital-acquired infections are the responsibility of the hospital. While that seems obvious, a clean, environmentally safe room impacts all employees, all families and is an essential part of a healing environment. These are not unseen tasks, although many patients may not see the work being done. These are not invisible milestones during the patients’ journey in our care. These are, and in the midst of any reform, will continue to be a significant factor in determining outcomes like overall comfort, length of stay, infection rates, falls, and even sentinel events—yes, it’s mission critical.

Step 4: Become Indispensable

The most important role you have in overcoming barriers is to reinforce the impact of the work in the context of the mission we serve, not the work itself. Remember, what differentiates excellence is not the work itself—HVAC is HVAC, but rather the response and consistency with which the work is completed—accurately, safely and cost effectively. For example, in almost every conversation I’ve ever had with leaders in plant operations or facilities, I’ve discovered that this is a group who understands cost effectiveness—it’s in their DNA. This group works hard to get every single ounce of utility and life out of a tool or piece of equipment. Senior leaders should know that if they want a role model on cost effectiveness and do-it-yourself resourcefulness, all they need to do is take a little walk down to the boiler room. When the barriers are gone, they’ll find a gold mine of innovation, creative problem solving and commitment to patient-centered excellence.

When you study all four steps you will see that the common thread is communication. To improve the accountability of your department, help your team understand the organization’s goals and clearly communicate how each person can contribute to these goals and will be measured. To demonstrate your accountability, clearly communicate to senior management how you and your team contributed to the organizational goals, helping you and your team earn even more respect.

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