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The Newsletter for Healthcare & Human Services

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Communication Corner

Promoting a Culture of Open Communication

Most organizations and leaders categorize themselves as having an *open and honest* environment in which employees are encouraged and should feel safe speaking up and voicing concern. In fact, you'd probably be hard-pressed to find an organization that doesn't have an *open door policy* for its employees. However, the reality is that the good majority of employees don't feel safe or confident to speak up when they need to—and this is especially true in healthcare. Research published by the Institute of Medicine reveals that 90 percent of nurses won't speak up in the face of bad practice (behavior), even in life and death situations.

Many healthcare professionals will likely tell you that although their organization promotes open and honest feedback, they rarely feel like this is truly the case. A common example may go a little something like this: During rounds, a nurse offers his opinion about a patient. The physician interrupts and says, "I'm the MD, and I think I can handle this patient, thank you." Not only does the nurse feel belittled and embarrassed, but he's likely to keep all future opinions to himself, even if it's to the detriment of the patient.

And there is indeed an impact on patients when open communication and opinions are siphoned. According to the Joint Commission, 70 percent of medical errors can be linked to poor communication in one way or another.

Simply put, we need to create an environment where employees feel safe voicing their concerns without fear of embarrassment or retaliation. We need to stop saying we have *open door* policies that encourage employees to speak up when they witness bad behavior, bad practice, or disagree with the leader's decisions unless we truly mean it.

Here's how you can begin to promote a culture of open communication and feedback:

- **Ask very specific questions to solicit feedback.** Employees know things that you don't. They witness interactions and conversations that you don't see or hear. They have valuable insights and feedback to share—you just need to wrestle it out of them (not literally of course!).

To solicit feedback and insights, make sure you're meeting with employees on a regular basis (at least once a month). Ask them specific, open-ended questions and take notes of what they're saying. Here are some questions to get you started:

- What can the company do better? What can I do better as a leader?
 - What's working well?
 - What keeps you from doing your best?
-
- **Follow through.** It's true that many employees won't speak up because they're afraid, but another key reason they don't speak up is complacency. They don't think anything will be done with their feedback, so why waste the energy? You may not be able to take action on every piece of feedback, and that's ok. You can, however, keep employees informed and close the feedback loop. Let them know what has or hasn't been done and the reasoning behind it. This way, the employee will know that you really are taking their suggestions and feedback seriously, and you'll stop those feelings of complacency.
 - **Be a good example.** All of your actions and words must back up your intents and promises. For example, if you tell employees that they should feel comfortable sharing feedback with you, don't get defensive or start arguing with them when they share it with you. If you tell employees they can trust you, but then you share confidential information with a co-worker, you're not demonstrating trustworthiness. If you complain about other people to your team and spread negativity, you're not acting as a positive role model and you're not encouraging a productive environment to share feedback. Think before you speak and strive to be a good example every day.

*"Perfection is not attainable,
but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence."
—Vince Lombardi*



The Leading Edge

Take a New Take on Complaints

If you're like most, you don't eagerly look forward to an upset family member or resident. In fact, you probably feel a sense of dread, annoyance, and/or anger as soon as the complaints start coming out. But what if you started looking at complainers differently? What if you actually started being thankful for them?!

To be sure, complainers keep us on our toes, push us to do better, and they ultimately remind us why our work is so important. Moreover, there is usually always some element of truth in a complaint. No matter how great your organization and staff are, there are going to be mistakes—no one is perfect. So when someone tells you something isn't right and they need you, you should be grateful for the opportunity and have a defined approach for managing that complaint.

Here are some surefire strategies to help you and your staff successfully navigate through (and even be thankful for!) complaints:

- **Listen, acknowledge, and apologize.** Listen to the complaint without

interruption, listen without judgment, and listen without going on the defensive. Sounds easy, but it's not. So, make a conscious effort to fully listen until the person with the complaint is finished speaking. After all, sometimes the only thing the complainer really needs is to be heard. The only thing you may need to actually do is listen and apologize.

- **Take it back to the team.** Believe it or not, sometimes when people complain, they're actually right! In these instances, you'll need to take the complaint back to the team. Share the complaint and decide on a way to address it. Maybe a team member needs more education, counseling, or coaching.
- **Don't treat all complaints the same way.** If you approach each complaint in the same exact manner, you're likely to frustrate the complainer(s) and you may miss the bigger picture. Take time to listen and learn and be cautious of applying a *cookie cutter* approach and response to complaints.
- **Thank them.** Thank the complainer for letting you know about the problem. Say something genuine like, "We can't fix problems we don't know about, so thanks for telling us."
- **Lastly, follow up with the complainer.** Let them know what you've done to address their concerns. Even if you can't fully address or solve their complaint, they'll appreciate that you listened and got back to them.

"Nothing is impossible, the word itself says 'I'm possible'!"
—Audrey Hepburn



News You Can Use

Study Shows ACOs have Saved Billions

A recent analysis has revealed that ACOs have saved the federal government more than \$3 billion. According to a report by analytic firm Dobson DaVanzo & Associates, ACOs lowered Medicare spending by \$3.53 billion from 2013 to 2017. The analysis also found that Medicare saved \$755 million after making shared savings payments.

Advocates of ACOs called on the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and Congress to find ways to *bolster ACO participation* to further drive savings following the findings. The president and CEO of the National Association of ACOs also noted that "ACOs have proven superior to Medicare's other value-based care initiatives" in a written public statement.

While several have touted the success of ACOs, others aren't quite sold on them. A recent Medicare Payment Advisory Commission analysis indicated that ACOs haven't done enough to reduce Medicare program spending. LTC providers have also said they want more from the ACO *pie*.

Read [the full Dobson DaVanzo report](#) for more information.

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

—Aesop



Just For Fun

One-liners that are Sure to Make You Giggle

What happens to a frog's car when it breaks down?

It gets toad away.

If you ever get cold, stand in the corner of a room for a while.

It's usually 90 degrees.

What did the duck say when it bought lipstick?

"Put it on my bill."

What do you call two monkeys that share an Amazon account?

Prime mates.



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