The Importance of Culture

The saying used to be: Culture eats strategy for lunch. Now, the thinking is: Culture doesn’t win over strategy—it IS the strategy. Focusing on culture, how to set it, nourish it, and maximize it is critical in today’s competitive society.

Brent Gleeson, former Navy Seal, addresses four key strategies to develop culture in his new book, TakingPoint. You can see similarities in what Magnet® teams do to keep staff engaged and turnover low. These are his four points:

• Defining the culture clearly.
• Managing the culture.
• Aligning the culture with strategy and intended results.
• Leveraging culture during times of change.

Using his experience of becoming and then being a U.S. Navy SEAL, Gleeson makes various points about how the culture drives the behavior that reinforces the culture. The end of the training for the distinct role lets others know that the people who survived the training are a cultural fit. The analogy for us is probably residency programs, because most orientation and onboarding sessions are not so intense about the culture. The difference between what the Navy does and what most of the rest of us do is the intensity with which the Navy reinforces the culture.

The variation we see between patient care units is an example of culture being set in the micro sense rather than the macro. When the culture is solidified throughout the organization, variations in how people behave, how managers interact, and how patients and families are treated, disappear. As Tye and Dent (2017) said, “culture is the invisible architecture of the organization.”

Think about SSM Health, one of the largest U.S. health care systems, and how their culture supports nonviolence. Cialdini (2016) described his experience of making a presentation at one their events. To prepare him, six employees spoke with him! One of them informed him that he was not to include bullet points. That is fairly startling to speakers who rely on PowerPoint® presentations! Their point was that he could keep those little black dots—SSM doesn’t were to be called information points! Further, they don’t attack problems they approach them. Down to small details, their culture is conveyed daily. SSM Health has taken the culture of nonviolence to the detail of the language that is used to convey common, everyday information.

Because culture has such a big payoff, not just in engagement and retention, but also in financial performance, it is critically important to the success of a business, including health care. Again, this reinforces the idea of why we have moved from the Triple Aim to the Quadruple Aim. That fourth element, the workplace environment, is so critical to making certain that teams are working as teams as opposed to conglomerations of people providing care. What are we doing to help others understand—and value—the culture of their workplace?

As we address the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) in health care, we may move from a focus on culture to managing tasks and budgets. When we do, we diminish our influence with the people who can make our organizations a success—direct care providers. The successful organizations that have sustained their ability to adapt to change and make the changes theirs are the ones who have culture as their strategy. If your goal is to be mediocre, you can forget about culture. Otherwise, it has to be something you think about and act on daily.
REFERENCES

Patricia S. Yoder-Wise, RN, EdD, NEA-BC, ANEF, FAAN
Editor-in-Chief
psywrn@aol.com

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