

Creating a Workplace of Choice Starts with Employees and Their Opinions

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Creating workplaces where people actually wait to work is the dream of health care organizations today. With projections of worker shortages continuing to cast a pall over the industry, focus has increasingly turned toward building a workplace that will attract and retain staff well into the future. More attention is being given to environments that recognize the balancing act of meeting the needs of both patients and employees. In essence, this movement has placed employees on equal footing with other customers in the organization and redefines traditional externally driven customer service efforts.

It wasn't so long ago that the term "customer" was a foreign concept in health care. There were debates about primary and secondary customers and whether the physician or patient was the most important customer. If employees were considered to be customers at all, their role was not very important. After all, employees were dedicated to helping others and chose to work in health care to help other people. There were also plenty of them.

Times have certainly changed. A recent study by the trade publication Modern Healthcare indicates that the shortage of qualified health care staff will get worse and will go well beyond nursing. Projections indicate that the nurse vacancy rate will reach 29 percent by 2020. Allied health professionals will also be much in demand. If the number of imaging procedures annually grows 140 percent by 2020 as projected, many more radiology technologists will be required. It is projected that there will be a shortage of 150,000 physicians by 2020, particularly in anesthesiology, radiology, cardiology, gastroenterology, and pulmonary critical care. There might even be a shortage of qualified CEOs, as many more retire than the number of people groomed to take their place.

More is at work than demographics. According to a public opinion study by research firm WirthlinWorldwide, there has been a shift in employee values. The shift has been from having a job with good pay and benefits to having a job that provides pay and benefits as a means to better balance family and work life. More than pay and benefits, employees value "having the tools and equipment to do the job, good communication, education, and qualified managers."

As employers have begun to come to grips with growing workforce shortages and value shifts, they have started to focus on employer of choice, or workplace of choice, initiatives. With such an undertaking, it is important to understand that the answer to being a workplace of choice lies within the organization's employees. The voice of the employee, much like the voice of the customer, is a very valuable resource that should not be overlooked.

Understand what employees think

Start by understanding what employees think about the current environment. Assess employee opinion survey data, or if not available, conduct the necessary research. This type of data will give insights into how employees perceive the organization, what they value in terms of benefits and salary, and the kind of support they get or want from their managers and supervisors. One of the most telling questions is whether employees would recommend an organization as a good place to work.

Exit interviews are another good source of information. It's important to understand both the reasons for resignations and the areas or departments most affected by voluntary turnover. Employees usually leave a manager rather than an organization. Focus groups of employees provide additional information. Select and invite employees from all shifts and across all job categories to come together to discuss how they feel about the organization.

Bryant Hanson, president and CEO of Floyd Memorial Hospital and Health Services in New Albany, IN, conducts a focus group of sorts every month by having an "associate" luncheon. He uses it as an opportunity for associates, what his organization prefers to call employees, to bring him their ideas for improving the work environment.

Analyze previous or current programs

Once the information has been gathered and analyzed, the next important step is to consider any initiatives and programs developed in response to identified employee needs. Assess them and determine whether they worked and are of value to employees. Too often, employee opinion information is gathered and programs developed, only to be reviewed when it's time for the next survey.

An East Coast hospital provides a great example of how to use employee opinion survey data. Survey results are shared with each department by a team composed of a senior leader, human resources representative, and the department manager. The senior leader shares organization-wide feedback, whereas the department manager shares department-specific information and contrasts it with feedback overall. Once the information is presented, the human resources representative facilitates a discussion on addressing areas or issues of concern. All of the information goes into a master document, and teams of employees are convened to develop solutions to the organization's most pressing issues. Employees regularly receive feedback on the outcomes and initiatives implemented by these groups, and quarterly random employee surveys are conducted to assess progress.

All too often, organizations find themselves chasing after what they think employees want, without ever really listening to them. Take, for example, the hospital that spent a great deal of money redesigning a nursing unit because it thought that a nicer setting would make employees and patients happier. Although the unit looked nice, the employees weren't involved in the design, so the same inefficiencies that made them unhappy in the old setting were built into the new environment.

Measure results

The organization at this point will need to measure the results of its efforts to address areas of concerns. Specifically, how have various initiatives affected turnover? Turnover is not necessarily bad, unless an organization is losing the wrong people. What really determines success is how many of the “right” people the organization retains. Those employees are often very self-directed and convey their organization in a highly favorable manner to the people they serve...whether that is in direct patient care or in a support role. Other people like to be around them because they make everyone feel better with their outlook and willingness to make the work environment a better place. If an organization isn’t keeping those employees, it is missing a major element of building a successful organization.

Lifespan, a health system based in Providence, RI, provides managers with training in the art and science of creating positive work environments and requires them to write retention plans and develop at least one departmental objective related to retention. In the first year of this board-directed focus on employee retention, voluntary turnover dropped by 12.4 percent, according to Brandon Melton, senior vice president of human resources.

Hire right

According to a 2002 study by the Advisory Board Company, a Washington-based company specializing in best practices research and analysis, a typical hospital recruits for experience and technical skills, but not for behavioral aptitudes. Consequently, many new hires are unable to adapt to job requirements, ultimately leading to unnecessarily high turnover in the first months of employment. The study recommends that virtually all hospitals use standardized behavioral screening in hiring. In this type of screening, an organization evaluates candidates, using a standardized, interview tool that provides a score for behavioral fit.

Have a concrete plan

Without a long-term, well-designed plan, workplace of choice efforts will be short-lived. Of course, the plan should be designed with employee feedback and involve employees. Some organizations go so far as to celebrate their plan publicly. A hospital in the Middle Atlantic recently began its nurse recruitment radio advertisements with the statement, “We listened to our nurses and designed the workplace that they told us they wanted.”

The plan should include a statement of desired outcomes, definition of roles and responsibilities in implementing plan elements, the specific role of employees, timelines for completing tasks and realizing results, and defined measurement tools. The plan should be a “living document” and be reviewed and adjusted regularly based on results achieved and key priorities.

According to the Advisory Board study, some hospitals have chosen to start their effort by focusing only on new hire retention. Through the implementation of a standardized selection process, they have cut new hire turnover in half. The result is impressive. The point is that no matter how small the effort, there should be a plan.

Ensure commitment

As in any successful initiative, the CEO and his or her entire leadership team must be squarely committed to a workplace of choice plan. Nothing will derail an effort more quickly than leaders who do not deliver on their promises. As the Advisory Board also notes, holding managers

accountable for employee retention is highly effective, as employees tend to leave their bosses and not their organizations.

Senior management can demonstrate its commitment in many small ways. Bryant Hanson's approach by meeting with employees during meal times on all shifts is an example. He also dresses more casually on these occasions to appear more approachable. Another CEO has taken patient rounding a step further by incorporating employee rounding to talk with employees to hear what has made their day easier or more difficult. She then makes sure that issues of concern are addressed immediately. Another CEO worked with a group of employees and human resources to develop employee services to make personal responsibilities more manageable. Employees can now go to a special designated area of the hospital to select take-out meals, drop off or pick up dry cleaning, and even get travel planning help.

Workplace of choice initiatives do not need to be expensive or grand. What they need to be is sincere, well conceived and executed, and relevant to employees. An organization can expect to see some immediate results within the first six months of its efforts and more long-term results in 12 to 18 months.



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