

Patient Experience and Accountability

By Rick Goodwin

*Director of Therapy Services
Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center*



Since the CMS announcement of Pay-For-Performance, Patient Experience has become a focus of our nation's hospitals. This push to improve patient experience germinated at the national level, but it is only at the local level that actions can make a difference.

At first blush it may seem that "the local level" means every healthcare professional who encounters a patient during his/her hospital journey. If that's true, then the only way to improve patient experience is through the performance and behavior of the front line staff. Each healthcare professional must perform and behave in a way that ensures positive experience. But is it true?

As with most things in life, what seems obvious at first becomes less certain with more scrutiny. Like the proverbial onion, each layer removed reveals another layer. It is true that the experience of any individual, navigating through any service industry, depends on the quality of each interaction with the 'workers.' It is self-evident that experience is shaped and colored by those directly involved in the experience. It must be true.

But peel back another layer and what do you find...more people. This layer reveals the people behind the people that interact with the patient. Another layer...more people, even less connected to direct patient care. What about these people who may never intersect with a patient? Do they matter in the patient's experience? Is there another level still? Where does it end? Which people have the greatest impact on patient experience? Eventually, one does run out of layers and out of people, and what is left is just the core. This core is the heart of the organization; the organization as a living, breathing organism.

Every organization has a feel to it – a vibe. When you walk in, you can feel that core. You know if it's

upbeat, energetic and eager, or tired, slow and sluggish. That core, that feeling, is the culture of the organization.

The culture of a hospital originates in its mission and values. If the mission and values don't live and breathe, the organization doesn't either. To live and breathe, the mission and values must permeate to the front lines with vitality and energy. The lofty words and values espoused in the hospital literature must be lived by the employees.

That brings us back to the individuals that interact with the patient. Why are we back? We are back because the culture of a hospital is a conglomeration of all the everyday actions of all the employees. A behavior may not be 'experienced' by a patient, but it adds to the whole. It changes the essence of the entity. It changes the vibe. It is felt. Maybe not right away, but eventually, either insidiously or positively, it works its way in.

Employees that buy in, contribute to the positive culture. Those that don't, don't. They erode it. They can even make it toxic. Culture is experienced by customers. Culture is experienced by patients. Culture

is patient experience.

This returns us to the layer that matters most: the people behind the people - the leadership. The experience of employees is largely dependent on how well leadership lives and breathes the mission and values. When leaders exhibit, or allow, behavior that does not align with the mission and values, regardless of the reason, they condone that behavior. A loud and clear signal is sent that the behavior is okay. It is okay to not be on board; to discount; to eye-roll and resist.

Accountability isn't about punishment. It is about growth, and insight, and positive movement, both for the individual and the organization. It is about moving people

higher on the journey. It is about Culture, with a capital C. It is about experience. If accountability isn't one of your hospital's core values, it needs to be. You can't get there without it. If it is, but is inconsistently applied – you can't get there. Not everyone will summit. Not everyone can. Not everyone should.

It is about the individual. It is about you. Whether changes are needed in your behavior or the behavior of those around you, it is still about you. Take a long hard look in the mirror. Don't pretend not to notice. Notice. And then act. Organizations that understand that truth, and live it, will flourish in the brave new world of "Patient Experience." Those that don't will flounder. They may perish. Most importantly, pa-

tients lucky enough to receive care in places with consistent accountability will get the care and experience they deserve.

Rick Goodwin has a Master's degree in speech pathology from Utah State University. For the past ten years he has been the Director of Therapy Services at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center (EIRMC) in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Rick's area of clinical expertise is head injury rehabilitation and he has published clinically relevant articles on that topic. As a member of the hospital's I AM EIRMC committee, his attention is often directed toward the hospital's mission and values and methods to effectively disseminate and instill those values throughout the organization.

Reprinted with permission from the Washington Healthcare News. To learn more about the Washington Healthcare News visit wahcnews.com.