Creating a Patient/Family Centered Safety Culture

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It isn't uncommon to have the customer focus shift away from the patient. There are numerous business drivers that take our focus off the people we are trying to serve – rising costs of doing business, shrinking reimbursement and ultimately trying to do more with less. As healthcare leaders, every opportunity must be spent shifting the focus back to the reason for existing. Leadership drives culture change and having the leader unceasingly focused on the patient and family for experience and quality outcomes is the first step.

To achieve a culture that is safe and patient/family centered requires a purposeful plan that truly transforms the organization. The executive leader must embrace the effort, own the culture change and sanction the focus in everything they do. Every leader in the organization must align with the executive leader and embrace the goal. This requires acting differently, using every opportunity to model and talk about why reaching the goals is important. It must be clear to and from each leader that it isn't an option not to achieve a culture that is safe and patient centered.

Achieving this culture requires building a safe environment where staff can do their best work. Trust must be present for people to begin acting differently. Employees must feel safe. And it is up to leadership to create the safe environment. Everyone needs to know that if something happens they will be guided through to learn and change. Leaders must model this learning. As a leader, talk about relevant mistakes you make and what you learn and change as a result. When others watch and hear you are unharmed, they will more likely jump on board.

In order for managers and staff to engage, they must understand the compelling reason for the change. Data analysis is a foundational element – creating the driving force behind the change includes benchmarking – internally and externally with a picture of current and future state. Data should readily be shared – at the beginning and throughout the process of transformation. Expect that initially there will be disbelief and attempts to discredit data, but over time with consistency the objections to data will lessen. With the analysis, select measures and measure them throughout the change process and over time to ensure there is no backsliding and that the cultural expectations are well imbedded into daily work.

Management staff must be equipped to manage and lead the transformation in their areas of responsibility. It is imperative that each leader buy into the vision in order to engage. They need to lead by example and to be skilled at coaching, teaching, and mentoring staff. If managers aren't equipped, they can create an unsafe environment and the goal will not be

reached. It is important for leaders to be self-reflective and model constant improvement. When I began to look inside me and change, change became easier for others.

Communication is critical throughout any transformational change. Even though the leader may believe people are tired of hearing the message, each person learns differently and may hear over time what you have articulated months earlier. Communicate progress, bumps in the plan, stories of success with patients, and where the organization is in terms of meeting goals.

Seek informal leaders and engage staff in the planning and execution. Over time, they will influence their peers. The people who can't seem to get on board will over time stand-out and that is one more opportunity for management to address the issue by helping the person engage or move to another work place that might better fit them. I learned as a leader that

everyone is watching and if unacceptable behavior that is disruptive and non-compliant is allowed the willing and enthusiastic players will lose hope. The role of leadership throughout transformation can't be overstated – it is the most critical part to success. Consistency, transparency and hopefulness will encourage staff to move forward.

Involving patients and/or family members in your plans can be highly effective. Patients and families need to be heard and have trust that the problem will be addressed and resolved.

Celebrate successes along the way – inter and intra-departmentally. Be public about progress and involve teams to identify celebration techniques.

How do you create and sustain a patient/family centered safety culture? It is achieved through leadership commitment and guidance. Cultures can and do change. Keep

the focus – forever. Your business depends on it. People are the reason healthcare businesses exist.

Wallin Enterprises formed because of Terri's drive to help organizations succeed with culture and system transformation. With extensive experience in clinical, administrative and executive operations, Terri is highly skilled in leading system design. Terri is sought out by leaders to speak to and coach others on improved business and system/process implementation.

Terri serves on Homecare Association of Washington's board and is president elect. She is a member of Visiting Nurse Association of America.

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