

Empowering the caretakers

In addition to navigating extraordinary complexity that is different with each patient, healthcare providers must also deal with a barrage of emotions expected since a patient, his/her family and friends could feel anxiety, helplessness, uncertainty, and relief. Simply speaking, it must be evident that it is all about people. It is crucial to find, train, supervise, support and empower the right people.



Naresh Goel of Jet Airways put it best when he said 'Everyone flies the same machine. The only thing which makes the difference is people.' While the Jet Airways story is a testament to the truth of this statement, it is even more accurate for healthcare. With the myriad of emotions that the patient and their immediate family members go through during their stay at a hospital, it is only befitting to hire the best people around who can make them feel comfortable.

It takes a great employer to get great employees

You cannot attract good people unless you are a good employer. It simply cannot be paying the highest salary. The best candidates expect just as much from the

organisation as the organisation expects from them. High-calibre people want to be with a company that is transparent, trustworthy and fair and cares for its people in every possible way. They want a stimulating work environment with clearly stated, reasonable goals and leadership focussed on empowering them. In the right setting, good employees become great ones and it shows.

Do not give them a job. Give them a cause

People give their best when they work for a common cause and a mission. When asked 'what do you do?' someone working for a hospital replied 'I save lives' while someone else with an identical job said 'I drive an ambulance.' In perhaps the most famous example of how unified corporate culture contributes to world-class outcomes, the

Cleveland Clinic ritualistically reinforces the ideas that 'everyone is a caregiver' and it is always – repeat always – 'Patient First'. If a patient presses a button to call for help, the very first Cleveland Clinic employee to walk by must stop and inquire. Many requests can be handled by anyone, regardless of medical training – 'I cannot reach the remote' or 'Please, I am thirsty.' Even in the Indian context, some well-known missionary hospitals could boast of great service quality largely because each of their employees shared the same cause. I must add, it could be equally possible in the case of a for-profit entity.

Have transparent and regular performance measurement

As they say, you cannot treat apples and oranges alike. People at all levels must have clear goals, role definition and a clear understanding of 'what will make a great performance'. There cannot be any ambiguity about expectations. Performance should be measured and tracked, as transparently as possible. And it cannot be just at the end of the year. If an employee's self evaluation is far from what the supervisor believes, it could be possibly on account of lack of clarity and non-specificity of goals and must be suitably resolved. Regular feedback not only helps in assessment, but allows for interventions necessary to help people achieve their peak performance.

Both employees and supervisors should know exactly what aspects of the job are being measured, how often and in what manner. Iterative improvements are good here too – if an employee is 'scoring well' but performing poorly, try measuring something else.

Have a clear and shared career trajectory for everyone

Building on the system of performance tracking, establish clear career trajectories for every staff member. Senior doctors as well as a housekeepers need to know how far they can go if they continue to deliver great performance. L V Prasad Eye Institute, for example, has clearly defined career growth paths, even for vision technicians at their remote centres in rural areas. A technician,

who may be a 'class X' pass bright, energetic girl from a village, could aspire to reach seemingly impossible heights. It is worth noting that two such technicians are currently pursuing their doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins in the US. For high turnover positions especially, like nurses, a planned progression of responsibility, salary and benefits can be the crucial element that retains an employee who may otherwise have moved on.

For superior patient care, take superior care of your nurses

Nursing is a monumental task. Nurses are always juggling multiple tasks for multiple patients. Its hectic, high-stress and largely thankless but it is also critical to the overall quality of care a patient receives. They are the ultimate frontline of any hospital, interacting with patients more often and for longer time periods than any other employee. Exceptional nurses are dearly loved by patients, who remember them fondly long after discharge, but unhelpful or sullen nurses often put the facility at a disadvantage from which it can never recover.

There is a global shortage of clinical staff. Nurses are highly sought after abroad, lured by far higher salaries. As a result, turnover is extremely high, which makes the retention and training of new nurses a nearly constant strain on resources. It can be very difficult to justify spending much time or money attempting to keep nurses that are likely to leave soon. But the measures suggested here are not expensive. The time required is more than reasonable when weighed against the cost of continually hiring and training new staff.

Have a strategy for physician recruitment

Physicians are simply the most important team members, when it comes to healthcare delivery. In the recent past in India, there has been a gradual shift in healthcare towards having physicians as employees rather than on a fee-for-service basis and that too, when physicians are attached to many hospitals. It must also be understood that being salaried, as it is true for all other industries, does not mean that hospitals should not offer financial rewards for performance. It just ties those rewards to metrics that really make a difference. Fee-for-service incentivises doctors to see as many patients as possible but bonuses for the doctors with the fewest errors would incentivise doctors to deliver the best quality care possible. These kinds of incentives bring the doctor's goals more in line with the overall facility. Doctors take greater ownership and have a more vested interest in improving the quality of care, which benefits everyone involved.

Deceptively simple, some of these ideas can be challenging to implement. It does require a non-negotiable view about the fundamental issues. It is not just the patient loyalty, but an engaged workforce and the healthy bottom line, which makes it a mission worth chasing. **MM**

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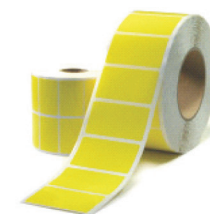
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