Engaging the Workforce

Employees who believe that management is concerned about them as a whole person—not just an employee—are more productive, more satisfied, more fulfilled. Satisfied employees mean satisfied customers, which leads to profitability.

—Anne M. Mulcahy, former CEO of Xerox

Guide to Reader

It is a simple but powerful precept: Leaders get things done through other people. Highly effective leaders are adept at getting employees engaged, enthused, and focused on the work at hand. We ask that readers be self-reflective as they read this chapter. To what extent do they view employees as simple instruments to get work done, as opposed to full-fledged partners in the mission of the organization? To what extent might leaders be abusing employees by not showing true respect? Success in leadership is evident when staff enthusiastically work toward the goals of the organization because of the personal equity their leader has built with them.

A Tale of Two Vice Presidents

Two department directors were promoted within their organization at approximately the same time as part of a formal restructuring and succession planning effort. Both individuals had risen through the management ranks quickly, with a long track record of successive promotions based on effective staff relationships and the ability to motivate others toward a common goal. When assuming their new roles, both were committed to not "losing touch" with the staff and frontline manager levels. They knew that, without the active engagement and support of these individuals, their tenure in the executive ranks might fall short of their lofty aspirations.

The first vice president went about networking and establishing relationships with his new executive peers and superiors within the C-suite. Because he had little formal interaction with these individuals during his time as a manager and department director, he felt he needed to spend a great deal of time getting to know them. Doing so would help him gain credibility and establish a new organizational identity as a hospital executive rather than a department head. His efforts proved to be fruitful, and he gained quick acceptance based on his insightful views and fresh perspective of hospital operations. However, as he celebrated his one-year anniversary in his first executive role, he began to hear rumblings that his managers and staff felt the move to vice president had "changed him" and that he was becoming "disconnected" from the staff. In response, he decided to participate in the hospital intramural softball league as a way to spend more time with staff away from the formal work setting. He had played on the radiology department team for three previous seasons, and his skill as

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a former college baseball player helped propel the team to the hospital championship two years in a row. Because the current season was already nearly halfway over, he had to sign up as an alternate, and he was told he would be called if the team was short on players. In each of the six remaining games, several players were absent due to illness, injury, or family obligations, but the newly minted VP was never called to participate. After the season was over, he invited the department director to lunch and asked her why he had never been asked to play. Sheepishly, she admitted that most of the staff had said they just did not feel comfortable having an executive on the team, and that his presence would change the dynamics on the field. In this instant, the VP realized he had focused too much of his energies on relationship building with the executive team and not enough attention on maintaining an effective rapport with his staff.

The second vice president took a very different approach to her transition into the executive ranks. She was determined to not be viewed as another "suit" and to maintain strong relationships with the staff in her departments. She recalled that, when she began in her first manager role, she sponsored a weekly happy hour at a local sports bar so that she could build rapport with her staff in an informal setting. Looking to continue the practice, she issued an open invitation to all managers and staff that she would host a mixer every Friday evening to encourage team building. The events were well attended, the atmosphere was extremely informal, and conversation flowed freely after a few cocktails. The new VP accomplished her goal of getting to know her team on a personal level. Midway through the first year, however,

volumes in her departments began to lag. A competing healthcare organization had begun an aggressive marketing campaign around women's services, which was one of her key areas of responsibility, and the VP was forced to make quick and aggressive decisions to establish a new strategy to grow volume and cut expenses. She developed a plan she felt could put the departments back on a path for success, and she called a meeting of her department managers for discussion. But when she began the dialogue, she was met with an overarching attitude of apathy and resistance to change. She struggled to convince her management team of the need to alter the status quo. And because she had shared so many personal interactions with each of them, she felt uncomfortable initiating difficult conversations around their poor management performance in a time that required great change. In this moment, she realized that, though she had succeeded in keeping good personal relationships with her staff, she had allowed herself to become too "familiar" with them—they now struggled to view her as a leader.

Be mindful: The art of leadership, as in life, is fundamentally about balance. Leadership is a balance between task and relationship, and focusing too heavily on either side of the equation can limit the success of even the most talented executive. Leaders depend on effective relationships with staff to execute on the strategic objectives they have set out for the organization. However, these relationships must be developed and maintained within the appropriate professional boundaries, or else the executive risks losing credibility with the team. The protocols presented in this chapter are intended to assist leaders in striking the appropriate balance.

DEVELOPING A STAFF FOCUS

Management literature not only honors the importance of a dedicated and competent workforce but also recognizes that the success of leaders rises and falls on the extent to which the staff supports the mission and strategic objectives of the organization. In today's rapidly changing healthcare landscape, organizations are serving an aging population with an increased demand for services, while at the same time dealing with shortages in the talent pool for many key clinical disciplines. Under these circumstances, organizations that are most effective at recruiting, retaining, and appropriately motivating their workforce will have the greatest likelihood of sustainable success. The ability to build good relationships with managers and frontline staff is an essential part of the healthcare leader's skill set. Certain cultural factors and commonly held stereotypes can serve as barriers to the development of effective staff relationships, but every leader has the responsibility to recognize and overcome these headwinds.

Because of differences in lifestyle, education, and socioeconomic background, executives often feel they do not have much in common with many of their employees. As a result, many senior leaders are uncomfortable interacting with staff and often come across as either awkward or overly "polished" in their presence. The underlying social distinctions often become amplified in a work setting and are reinforced by the formal organizational chain of command. Hierarchies can emphasize power distinctions between senior leaders and frontline staff, and these distinctions can seep into the subconscious and affect the way we perceive one another. No matter how approachable executives may be, some employees will likely interact with them carrying preconceived notions that the executives think too highly of themselves. Unfortunately, these kinds of mental images can prevent many of us—executives and staff alike—from getting to know one another, and they can bring about discomfort and intimidation when we interact with people

with whom we do not typically socialize. Instead of learning how to rise above these feelings, many of us choose to avoid the interactions altogether.

Some executives are distant both in and out of the office setting, and they only spend time with their employees when they need something done. Consider, for instance, those CEOs who only go into the workplace when The Joint Commission arrives. In turn, some employees are equally distant and harbor ill will toward executives whom they perceive to be insincere. Once again, we see how perceptions can be more powerful than reality. More complicated interactions come into play when frontline staff members are promoted. Though this upward mobility is positive for the organization, interactions between the new leader and former colleagues can become strained if former peers perceive a change in behavior or interaction with the professional advancement.

Even in light of these challenges, many organizations have developed cultures that promote effective interactions between leaders and staff in both professional and social settings. Such successful interaction happens because both parties are open and willing to accommodate the other. Interaction should not appear unnatural; it should be considered part of a structured approach to developing effective staff relations on behalf of the executive. The protocol summarized in Exhibit 6.1 and described in the sections that follow can help leaders improve their working relationships with the rank and file.

EXHIBIT 6.1: Protocol for Developing a Staff Focus

The following framework can enhance the effectiveness of workforce interactions:

1. Turn the organizational chart upside down.
2. Give up the home field advantage.
3. Set the right tone.

Turn the Organizational Chart Upside Down

Leaders often tend to judge their worth by their title or by the scope of their organizational responsibility. The prevailing thought has been that the higher you move up in the organizational hierarchy, the more important and successful you have become. In a healthcare setting, however, those at the top of the organization are actually *least* positioned to have an impact on the *daily* operations of the organization. Though senior leaders can set large-scale standards and strategies, the caregivers are the ones who create the environment and outcomes. After all, patients will still receive care regardless of whether the CEO shows up to work. The key to long-term organizational success lies in engaging the hearts and minds of those on the front lines, so leaders should focus on empowering employees. They should seek to instill in employees a sense of personal pride in the organization and a sense of ownership for the organization's strategic objectives. In order to achieve this sense of ownership, leaders may have to avoid relying on their formal power and actively cede much of the authority for day-to-day operations to those closer to the patient experience. The following are some examples of how this shift in the balance of power can be manifested:

- *Appropriately delegate authority.* One of the most effective ways to show respect for employees' skill sets is to delegate the authority for important tasks, especially those tasks that directly affect employees' ability to perform their jobs. Healthcare organizations are notorious for requiring multiple levels of approval for even the most minor of expenditures. By contrast, Ritz Carlton luxury hotels have a policy that empowers any employee—from a front desk clerk with ten years of experience to a housekeeper brand new to the job—to address any need to enhance the customer experience, with the ability to spend up to

$2,000 without additional approvals! Not only does this policy facilitate rapid resolution of customer service issues; it also underscores to the employees that they are trusted to use their best judgment and that they "own" the goal of creating the ideal customer experience.

- *Be transparent.* For decades, people in leadership positions kept strategic information close to their vests. Many held a perceived notion that frontline employees would not understand or care about the complexities of the business world, or that the employees might share sensitive information that would compromise the organization's ability to execute on its goals. However, recent experience has shown the benefits of transparency for leaders as much as for caregivers. Caregivers who are open with patients and families when clinical errors are made have been found to have an improved chance of regaining trust and building ongoing relationships with the patients involved. Similarly, leaders who are open with staff about the organization's current performance (good or bad) and future direction can better educate the staff around the roles they can play in helping to achieve the established vision. Consider the current situation, in which the shifting reimbursement landscape has led many organizations down a path of significant cutbacks and reductions in force. Hospital leaders cannot control all of these dynamics, but they can provide regular updates to make the staff aware of how the organization is performing. The informed staff can then help devise creative solutions in times of reduced volume or reimbursement, perhaps offering ideas that will improve the organization's bottom line and save jobs. Too often, leaders take a paternalistic approach to problem solving and propose solutions without consulting the staff, even though frontline staff have the strongest grasp of the

organization's daily operations. The perspective of the staff can only be obtained through an open environment that fosters communication and the sharing of information between executives and the front lines.

- *Be a facilitator, not a roadblock.* The role of a leader in an organization dedicated to employee engagement is one of collaboratively setting and communicating the organization's strategy and direction, creating a safe environment for staff to execute on this strategy (including allowing them to take calculated risks without fear of repercussions), providing the tools and support legitimately required for the work, and then removing any roadblocks (organizationally or environmentally) that could prevent the employees from doing their jobs effectively. Every executive should strive to be perceived by frontline staff not as a roadblock but as someone who works each day to ensure that the staff can provide the very best care to the patients served by the organization.

Give Up the Home Field Advantage

The concept of home field advantage comes from the sports world and states that teams tend to play better in their home stadium in front of a friendly audience and familiar surroundings. Similarly, business executives tend to fall into habits that reinforce the traditional power-based organizational hierarchy and cater more to their own preferences and comfort than to the convenience of the staff. Some of these habits have become so ubiquitous that leaders fail to consider how they might affect the staff; even actions leaders take to build positive relationships with the staff may, in fact, be having the opposite effect. In developing a culture of employee ownership, executives should remember that their position exists to improve the ability of the staff to perform their roles effectively—thus,

leaders should always put the needs of the employees ahead of their own. Considerations include the following:

- *Abandon the open door policy.* For years, executives were taught that they needed to make themselves available to employees via an open door policy or a set time when employees can meet with the leader in the executive office. This policy, though noble in its intent, is symbolic of the traditional power-based management style in that it requires the employee to come to the manager rather than making the manager truly accessible to the employee. Some employees may feel comfortable going to the executive suite, but many more do not. In industry, many companies have chosen to locate the executive offices on the manufacturing floor as a forcing function, so that even the most senior leaders are required to interact with frontline staff daily (Graban 2012). Similarly, leaders in healthcare should spend time each day outside of their offices and actively seeking feedback from frontline employees.

- *Eat in the hospital cafeteria.* Time is the most precious commodity to every leader in healthcare, and the lunch break (when we are able to come up for air long enough to take lunch) can be a welcome respite in a fast-paced environment. Leaders often develop a habit of retreating to the office at lunchtime to catch up on e-mails or to try to make headway on the "to-do" list. The lunch hour, however, represents a wonderful opportunity to interact with the frontline staff in an appropriate social setting, and also to begin breaking down any "ivory tower" misconceptions people might have about elaborately catered meals in the executive suite. Take a few days each week to have lunch in the cafeteria, and sit with a group of employees rather than

with other leaders. Lunch can provide an excellent platform for seeking feedback and providing updates on organizational performance.

- *Make off-shift visits.* Healthcare is a 24/7 business, and leaders are accountable not only for what happens on the day shift but also for what occurs after hours and on the weekends. The staff on the nighttime and weekend shifts often tend to feel disconnected from the happenings of the organization, and their lack of direct interaction and real information can contribute to misperceptions and rumors capable of poisoning the culture. Executives should regularly visit evening-shift employees by coming in early or staying late, and they should set a time to visit with staff on weekends. Coordinating the weekend visit with the week the executive is serving as the administrator on call can serve as a good reminder.

Leadership Research and Theory Support

Employee engagement has become a leadership mantra in recent years, and Men (2015) provides a broad review of the literature on the topic. She summarizes, "Employees perceive a better relationship with the organization when they perceive their managers to be authentic, ethical, balanced, fair, transparent, and consistent in what they say and do."

Men, L. R. 2015. "Employee Engagement in Relation to Employee–Organization Relationships and Internal Reputation: Effects of Authentic Leadership and Transparent Communication." *Public Relations Journal*. Accessed October 6. www.prsa.org/Intelligence/ PRJournal/Vol9/No2/.

Set the Right Tone

A leader's words and actions serve as cues to the employees about not only how the employees perceive the leader but also how they perceive the organization as a whole. Leaders may not always "feel" like a leader in every instance and circumstance; however, it is critical that they "act" the role of leader in all staff encounters to reinforce a culture of staff engagement. Leaders set the tone for the organization, and they must model the behavior and attitude they would like to see in the employees they are leading. Leaders are not allowed to have bad days, and if they do, they cannot make negativity evident to the employees. The following are some tips for setting a positive tone:

- *Be eternally optimistic.* Every organization will encounter difficult times, but exceptional leaders understand the importance of developing a strong strategy and exuding a positive outlook that the organization is on the right track. Similarly, leaders should always assume optimistic intent in terms of their interactions with others; they should not assume the worst about the motivations of their staff.

- *Do not complain.* Making negative comments about the performance of others—even if those comments are warranted—is typically counterproductive for those in leadership positions. First, it sends a message to the staff that complaining is an acceptable practice. Second, it might stoke animosity among employees who feel that executives are so well compensated that they should not be complaining about anything. Executives should remember that, in the eyes of the staff, the moment you become a victim, you cease to be a leader.

- *Adopt a can-do attitude.* Individuals who work to solve problems and find a way to collaborate with others have

the ability to break through even the most burdensome bureaucracy.

SUMMARY

Healthcare is going through a period of great change, and change can be a frightening thing for employees who desire security and stability. It is often in periods of great change, however, that the most exciting innovations are developed. Our field is shifting from one centered on the provision of acute, episodic care to one that focuses the continuum of the patient experience in a customer-focused and high-quality manner. Transparency will become a hallmark of the future, with publicly reportable outcomes and quality data serving as a key driver of consumer decisions. Leaders within healthcare have the responsibility to engage the staff in their respective organizations not only to embrace these changes but also to see them as an opportunity—the chance to be part of an evolution that will greatly enhance the care provided to the patients they serve. In the years ahead, only those organizations that capture the creative energies of their employees and instill a sense of ownership within them will be able to make the transformative changes required without disrupting their current operations. The process will require a change in mind-set for leaders: Their vision of the executive role will shift from one of top-down decision making to that of a facilitator who delegates authority appropriately and empowers employees to help navigate the uncharted waters ahead.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Leadership is a balance between task and relationship. What are some risks of focusing too much on either driving results at all costs or being too familiar with your staff?

2. A strong link has been found between staff satisfaction and patient satisfaction. Why do you think this connection exists?

RESOURCES AND EXERCISES FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

1. Recent years have seen an increased focus on employee "engagement," as demonstrated by the fact that today's surveys are engagement surveys, not satisfaction surveys. Conduct some Internet research and determine (a) if there really is a difference between employee satisfaction and employee engagement, (b) what elements make up engagement, and (c) how employee engagement in your organization compares to the rates reported in articles found online.

2. Review the Human Resources Ethics Survey provided in Appendix A of this book. Complete the survey and use it as a basis for discussion with colleagues.

3. Read the *Harvard Business Review* article "Competing on Talent Analytics" (2010) by Davenport, Harris, and Shapiro, available here: https://hbr.org/2010/10/competing-on-talent-analytics. Do you agree with the primary tenets of the article?

4. The business strategy firm Root (www.rootinc.com) has based much of its employee engagement work on a quote:

   > Tell me, I'll forget. . . .
   > Show me, I'll remember. . . .
   > Involve me, I'll understand.

   The quote has been attributed to Benjamin Franklin but likely is originally from Xun Kuang, a Chinese Confucian philosopher who lived from 312 to 230 BC. How does this

passage relate to your relationship with the workforce as a leader? And to what extent do employees have confidence that you are engaged with them in their work, versus directing them from the executive suite?

REFERENCE

Graban, M. 2012. *Lean Hospitals: Improving Quality, Patient Safety, and Employee Engagement*. New York: CRC Press.