Joy in Work-A Leader’s Critical Obligation

Background

A commitment to transforming a healthcare organization to one that embodies High Reliability can be a significant challenge to Quality and Safety Leaders. A strong foundation must be established that drives leadership to zero-harm goals, establishes a positive safety culture and the institution of a robust process improvement culture. None of this can be achieved without a stable and dedicated group of Quality employees who find meaning and joy in their daily work.

Problems

In January 2018, there was a 30% vacancy rate in the Department of Quality, Patient Safety & Outcomes primarily due to the following reasons:

- Frequent leadership and employee turnover
- Poor teamwork among employees
- Significant lack of work life balance leading to burnout
- Perception of minimal advancement opportunities
- Lack of a cohesive mission and vision within the department

Methods

Rapid creation of a “Joy in Work” transformation process that included:

- Partnering with HR to aggressively prioritize and streamline the recruitment and hiring process for open positions
- Soliciting employee involvement in potential hire decision-making
- Creating an environment where failure as a path to success is permissible and expected
- Involving all employees in department short-term and long-term goal setting: 90-day and 1-year
- Conducting frequent and regular employee meetings and “closing the loop” on all identified issues/suggestions
- Creating a “cross-check” atmosphere where all employees (including leaders) agreed to allow colleagues to check and intervene (in a dignified way) regarding behavior that was determined to be undermining or demoralizing
- Quality, Patient Safety and Outcomes leadership commitment to rapid resolving of outstanding and current operational and relational concerns negatively impacting the department

Results/Learning Points

- All Open FTE positions filled within 120 days
- April 2018 Safe & Reliable SCORE survey results revealing the following domains in the 99th percentile:
  - The employees from different disciplines/backgrounds work together as a well-coordinated team.
  - It is easy for employees to ask questions when there is something that they do not understand.
  - The learning environment is protected and promoted by Quality, Patient Safety and Outcomes leadership
  - Employees feel that solving work problems is a participatory process with their supervisor
  - Employees do not plan to leave the job within one year

In the relatively short time period of the implementation of the “Joy in Work” transformation process, burnout did not improve as much as expected as employees relayed that they felt they were working too hard, not able to take enough breaks and were generally exhausted. This was likely due to the fact that even though rapid hiring occurred within the transformation process time period, the necessity to train new employees contributed even more to the already existing feelings of burnout. As of mid-2019, significant FTE expansion has occurred with employees experientially reporting less burnout. A formal assessment will occur in late 2019 with deployment of another SCORE survey.

The existing SCORE survey is not performed often enough to consistently be used as a tool to measure cultural and engagement strengths and opportunities. Some form of a “pulse” survey will be developed in between SCORE survey time periods to provide more consistent feedback and allow for timely improvements in culture and engagement.

Employees report that the culture of the department has changed in significant ways:

- The previous culture did not have the same level of openness in work-related interactions. Employees did not feel that certain questions could be asked and addressed. After implementing and promoting an open door policy, employees feel empowered to voice concerns and in general, feel “heard”, which contributes to their overall joy.
- Implementing a leadership style of promoting excellence and supporting one another produced a trickle-down effect with employees regularly reporting they have pride and integrity in their work because leadership genuinely cares.

1 https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/31/high-reliability