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Survey Your Way to Better Performance

Targeting Real Drivers Yields Tangible Results

By Tom Olivo

Most organizations use the Rodney Dangerfield method of surveying employees—they periodically hand out unscientific questionnaires that don't get any respect.

These questionnaires typically ask employees about their overall attitudes, perceptions of the organization, and feelings about the working climate. Given the vagueness of these types of questions, the findings rarely provide organization leaders with any firm direction on how to make tangible improvements.

But there is an approach to employee surveys that can help your hospital's bottom-line results. **The key is targeting the real drivers of employee performance so that your surveys yield concrete metrics that reveal ways you can boost performance.** And improved performance translates into significant benefits, including greater efficiency, higher patient satisfaction levels, more market share, and better financial results.

Connecting the (Driver) Dots

Our team studied employee performance in a wide range of industries. The research and analysis reveals that organizations achieve better performance when employees are:

- Satisfied with their jobs – Content with the nature of the work, the organization, and the environment or culture



When a hospital has talented and capable professionals in frontline management positions, employee satisfaction increases, employees do their jobs better, and patient satisfaction levels rise.

- Loyal to the organization – Willing to recommend their organization to friends as a good place to work
- Engaged in their profession – See it in a positive light and encourage others to consider it as a career.

Based on our extensive work in the healthcare arena—we have a database of survey results from more than 200,000 healthcare professionals at 500 healthcare delivery systems—we know this “trifecta” of performance drivers holds true.

Employees who are satisfied, loyal to their hospitals, and engaged in their professional efforts set off a cascade of good results. High scores in these measures correlate to high scores in patient care, including safety, service, and clinical quality. If you increase employee satisfaction levels, not only does your hospital achieve greater cost efficiency and productivity on a daily basis, but you also enhance your reputation as a center of excellence, which in turn helps increase your institution’s market share and, ultimately, its net operating margins.

So how do you create a working environment where employees score high in these key measures? We contend that among the many factors that contribute to employee satisfaction, the top three are good leadership, good frontline management, and an institutional focus on patient care versus profits. Others include rewards for good performance and an absence of frustration in day-to-day processes.

Of all the factors that matter to employees, the quality of frontline management is the most important driver of performance improvement.

When a hospital has talented and capable professionals in frontline management positions, employee satisfaction increases, employees do their jobs better, and patient satisfaction levels rise. In our data, good frontline management correlates strongly with high patient satisfaction.

Writing the Prescription for Improvement

Lee Memorial in Fort Myers, Fla., and Scripps Health in San Diego, Calif., are two examples of organizations that reached a new level of maturity and sophistication by revamping their surveys to ask about the key drivers of performance rather than just employee feelings about the workplace.

Their surveys now ask questions written specifically to pinpoint where frontline management needs improvement (e.g., managers who tolerate indifferent customer service).

The ability to identify individual managers who were negatively affecting performance gave Lee Memorial the opportunity to structure an “up or out” improvement program. With coaching from HR professionals, managers who needed to improve their performance in areas affecting employee and patient satisfaction had to do so by specific deadlines. Otherwise, they were reappointed to lesser posts. The program has resulted in dramatic improvements in these managers’ performance and subsequent gains in other measures.

At Scripps Health, the challenge was to maintain top-level performance at multiple campuses spread over 30 miles. By addressing frontline management problems identified through employee surveys—and doing so consistently across the campuses—Scripps raised performance levels across the board. And the organization has maintained a culture of excellence in all of its locations, which is a rare achievement.

Among the institutions represented in our database, Scripps earns one of the highest scores for professional engagement among its employees—consistently in the high 90th percentile. Scripps’ reputation for excellence in its healthcare marketplace is directly related to this level of engagement among employees.

Most importantly, both Lee and Scripps take seriously the connection between employee satisfaction and key performance results: patient satisfaction, clinical quality, and financial health. These organizations discovered that when employees register satisfaction in surveys, all other performance measures rise. And when satisfaction falls, so does performance.

Making the Connection

Our approach can be summed up in three basic steps:

- Measure the right outcomes when you survey employees
- Make the connection between employee survey results and the performance of your institution
- Persist in following through from survey results to performance improvement programs.

With this approach, you can use employee surveys to identify where prescriptions for improvement are needed. Your surveys will become more than an interesting exercise—they’ll be viewed as a respected methodology for adding real value to your institution. ■

Tom Olivo is co-founder of Healthcare Performance Solutions, president of Success Profiles Inc., and co-author of the best-selling book Impending Crisis: Too Many Jobs, Too Few People. For more information on Healthcare Performance Solutions’ employee survey methodology, visit www.healthcareps.com.