In 2004, Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) University Hospital Hamilton won the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Their journey began in 1999, when the hospital started to explore performance excellence. Diane Grillo, who is currently vice president, marketing and communications, played a central role in the process. At the time, Grillo served as RWJ Hamilton’s senior vice president, chief learning and communication officer. Reflecting back, she recalls how the Baldrige framework helped RWJ Hamilton develop its vision and engage with key stakeholders, including patients, the community, and employees. Grillo underscores the importance of employee engagement to the process, “Employee engagement is the key to making sustainable changes in an organization. Since we are a community hospital, employees serve as our marketing and public relations department.” The disciplined approach to service, quality, and employee engagement required to win the Baldrige National Quality Award endures within RWJ Hamilton’s organizational culture. Today, the HR department continues to focus on improving employee engagement and measuring performance.

Award-winning health care organizations, like Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton, typically use five techniques to increase employee engagement:

1. Leverage the interview process to hire better quality employees.

Finding and hiring qualified candidates is important to HR for two reasons. First, health care professionals expect to work with peers who are competent. If this does not occur, employee engagement decreases. On the other hand, when teams of highly competent people are brought together, employee engagement tends to grow. Second, the competition for talent is expected to get tougher as health care reform generates demand for more services. As Bruce Colligan, associate vice president, human resources at RWJ Hamilton notes, “There are two new hospitals being built in our area, and our goal is to be the preferred employer.”

An effective way to hire better quality employees is to standardize the hiring process and ask the same questions of all candidates. Behavioral-based interviewing is a proven technique for identifying applicants with the right technical skills and the necessary intangible qualities. Colligan comments, “We can hire people with the right technical skills, but it’s not just what people do, it’s how they do it. As much as 80 to 90 percent of an employee’s success comes from emotional intelligence – we want to evaluate those intangible qualities.” An interview guide comprised of behavior-based questions is a good

In health care, employee engagement is closely linked to patient satisfaction, employee retention, and the bottom line. When employee satisfaction increases, so does patient satisfaction. Better Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCACHPS) scores will translate into higher Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) reimbursement rates. In addition, engaged employees are more likely to stay with the organization. Higher levels of employee retention are tied to better quality care, as well as lower costs for temporary and overtime staff.

Given the clear organizational benefits associated with employee engagement, it is no surprise that this area is central to the National Institute of Standards and Technology’s (NIST) Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. The Baldrige Health Care Criteria for Performance Excellence recognize that physician and staff engagement are essential for quality care. The Workforce Focus criterion evaluates how organizations build an effective and supportive environment, as well as how they engage their workforce.

Important element in the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program is the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. While this award initially focused on manufacturing, service, and small business organizations, Congress expanded eligibility to health care and education organizations in 1998.
way to explore how applicants have demonstrated key job-related behaviors in the past.

Progressive organizations also leverage technologies to support structured interviewing and behavior-based questions. RWJ Hamilton, for example, will be implementing a behavioral assessment solution in the spring of 2012. Rosemarie Frank, director of human resources, observes, “Bringing in quality people is hard. By using behavioral assessment software, we hope to increase the number of quality candidates available to interview. We recognize that higher quality staff will result in greater employee engagement.”

Provide employees with clear goals, then track and communicate their progress.

Cascading organizational goals down to the employee level can create greater clarity around individual responsibilities. However, once employees understand their goals, their progress must be evaluated and consistently communicated to them. Unfortunately, in a 24/7-work environment such as health care, the performance management process can fall by the wayside. Therefore, organizations that embrace a structured performance management process usually find that it increases engagement among both managers and employees.

In addition to structuring the process, automating the process can be very beneficial. About two years ago, RWJ University Hospital Hamilton implemented performance management software. Because performance management is now easy to complete, directors, managers, and employees are all more engaged. Rosemarie Frank comments, “The manager sends the evaluation to the employee and may ask the employee to complete a self-assessment. Then they review the evaluation with the director. This approach has increased employee engagement within each department.”

Promote communication between management and employees.

Although the health care environment does not lend itself to regular communication between management and employees, encouraging a dialogue can significantly improve employee engagement. One approach used by many organizations is to implement employee engagement surveys. Polling employees about workplace satisfaction and then reacting to the results is a great way to enhance engagement. The HR department at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton, for example, responded to employee engagement survey results by developing a dozen targeted training courses in areas such as director and manager communication skills.

Another way to enhance communication is to respond publicly to employee concerns and to tie the discussion to the organization’s strategic goals. When senior management takes time to share information and respond to employees, it shows that workforce input is valued. At RWJ Hamilton, senior leaders engage in rounding on the hospital floors. This facilitates face-to-face interaction between management and employees, and ensures that employees have the necessary resources to do their jobs. Quarterly town hall meetings are also a good forum where management can communicate and engage with employees. RWJ Hospital Hamilton aligns its town hall meetings with the organization’s six “pillars” for performance excellence: People, Service, Quality, Finance, Growth, and Innovation.

Offer positive feedback and employee recognition.

Employee recognition is a universal motivator and driver of both employee satisfaction and engagement. Although it can be challenging to provide recognition regularly in a health care environment, it is certainly not impossible. HR should take the lead with employee recognition by assembling a cross-functional recognition team and giving this group the responsibility of creating an organization-wide recognition plan. Performance management software can be leveraged to easily capture and deliver employee feedback. When it comes to recognition, organizations shouldn’t be afraid to think outside the box. For example, looking ahead, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton will no longer rely solely on internal feedback for employee recognition. They plan to seek input from visitors and patients for employee recognition programs like “Most Valuable Player” and “Employee of the Year.”

Provide educational opportunities to employees.

When health care organizations encourage employees to improve their skills and grow professionally, it results in higher levels of employee engagement and retention. The HR department should play a central role in providing training that addresses issues such as employee communication and team building. It also can spearhead initiatives, such as tuition reimbursement programs and internships targeted at college students studying nursing or other health care-related disciplines. New hire mentorship programs also can bolster employee engagement. Investing in education and development means employees are more likely to feel invested in their role and committed to the organization.

Conclusion

Award-winning health care organizations don’t leave employee engagement to chance. They proactively cultivate an engaged workforce throughout the employee lifecycle – from the application and interviewing phase, through to performance management, employee recognition, training, and organizational communication. As evidenced by RWJ University Hospital Hamilton, this disciplined approach leads to greater patient satisfaction, employee retention, and organizational success.

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