Transforming a long-term care community into an Accountable Care Organization is an excellent way to increase employee retention, improve resident and patient satisfaction, and raise the standard of care.

Long-term care communities of all types are being challenged to do more with less. In response to these demands, managers expect their employees to be accountable for helping achieve more goals than ever.

In this white paper, we explore the driving forces behind the push for employee accountability, challenges facing organizations as they try to implement initiatives around accountability, and ideas for gaining traction.

We also share the experiences and insights of healthcare professionals from a range of organizations, as well as an expert in the field of human resources.

While the prospect of implementing a program around employee accountability can seem daunting, it also offers managers a perfect opportunity to be leaders when it comes to talent management practices. Without accountability, organizations risk a reduction in employee morale and productivity, which can lead to poor performance that can negatively impact the people under their care. With accountability, organizations can unlock the full potential of their workforce and establish themselves as the long-term care organization of choice for both care providers and care recipients.
What is Employee Accountability?

Employee accountability for healthcare can be defined in two ways. First, it’s about creating a culture in which employees feel responsible for organizational goals, such as providing person-centered care, and ensuring optimal outcomes. Second, it’s about organizations holding employees accountable for their actions and behaviors; for example, by proactively managing poor behavior and tying compensation to positive behaviors and activity. In essence, employees are held personally accountable to the organization and its patrons, and the organization is responsible for making sure employees satisfy clearly defined expectations.

Frederick Morgeson, Professor of Management at the Eli Broad Graduate School of Management at Michigan State University, shared his thoughts on this. He teaches and conducts research in human resource management and organizational behavior, and is an Executive Officer of the Academy of Management’s HR Division.

According to Professor Morgeson, “Instead of simply exhorting employees to take responsibility, organizations should put in place structures that encourage, enhance, and enable people to be accountable.”

Why it’s Challenging to Establish Employee Accountability

Though the need for — and benefit of — employee accountability is clear, many organizations find themselves struggling to establish a strong-rooted culture around it. Interestingly, one barrier to success can be longevity of staff. Those who have worked for an organization over many years often become fixed in their ways and less open to change. Regardless of time employed by an organization, employees will be resistant to adopting a culture of accountability if they’re worried about the consequences of making mistakes. As noted by Professor Morgeson, “If employees don’t have the necessary resources to make the best decisions — or if they anticipate they’ll be punished if they make a poor decision — the organization will likely see resistance to any initiatives designed to enhance accountability.”

More and more organizations are striving to achieve better employee accountability, even as they face challenges. “As competitive pressures have increased and the labor market remains uncertain, organizations are looking for better bottom-line performance. With a growing focus on doing more with less, healthcare organizations are focused on making every person count, and that means making sure people are held accountable for the responsibilities within their purview,” explained Professor Morgeson.

Employees may also feel resentful about accountability initiatives, assuming that management is simply trying to offload its responsibilities. At the same time, management can fear a loss of influence by empowering their staff to shoulder more responsibility. Professor Morgeson noted, “Whether managers are worried about undermining their basis of power or concerned that information will be shared with competitors, the fear about being transparent with employees can be detrimental and counterproductive.”

Organizations need to analyze their existing culture to determine why employees might not want to assume more responsibility. For example, when an organization is risk-averse and takes a punitive approach to addressing problems, employees will follow suit and avoid accountability.
As with any major undertaking, it’s advisable to learn from those who’ve successfully tackled the initiative. Here are words of wisdom from healthcare professionals whose organizations are on the path to achieving a higher level of accountability.

**Prepare employees for change.**
“Communicate the reason for and value of employee accountability, and train employees so they thoroughly understand how their role is connected to the accountability initiative, what the organization expects of them, and how they can be successful. In addition, form teams so employees are involved in developing plans and policies for accountability and have an opportunity to provide input. By feeling heard, employees are more likely to buy in to change and the associated processes.” – Joann Kaminsky, Director of Employment and Employee Relations at Uniontown Hospital

**Take a grassroots approach.**
“Form a focus group and involve associates with creating an action plan for their departments. Complement this with frequent communications via monthly all-staff meetings, newsletters, emails, paystub attachments, and whiteboard notices.” – Lisa Acker, Sanctuary at Fraser Villa, Director of Human Resources

**Proactively plan for workforce demands.**
“Align training and education with the organization’s upcoming needs. For example, if the organization is short on coders and is moving to a new coding schema, train file clerks to become coders. By repurposing existing employees for tomorrow’s needs, HR can set the organization up for success while empowering employees with the skills that will be in demand.” – Molly Weaver, Director of Employment, Children’s Mercy Hospitals & Clinics

**Make it manageable.**
“People get overwhelmed at the thought of a changing culture. Instead of trying to tackle everything at once, focus on what the organization can do this year to drive accountability.” – Lisa Brock, Vice President of Human Resources at Overlake Hospital Medical Center

**Establish a culture of safety.**
“In the normal course of business, everyone makes mistakes. The key is to make sure employees feel psychologically safe to report problems and errors. Paradoxically, organizations will find a greater incidence of errors and mistakes when they provide a supportive environment because employees feel comfortable raising issues. However, units that report minor mistakes end up dealing with fewer major problems; by addressing smaller challenges, organizations learn how to prevent them from building into a significant issue.” – Frederick Morgeson, Professor of Management at the Eli Broad Graduate School of Management at Michigan State University

**Think Beyond Monetary Compensation**
With tightening budgets, pay for performance is challenging to sustain. Professor Morgeson suggests these alternative — and proven — ways to reward employees.

- **Offer meaningful incentives** by finding out what motivates each employee.
- **Give broad acknowledgement** within the organization, such as through an award.
- **Send a letter of recognition** to acknowledge an employee’s achievement.
- **Provide informal and formal feedback** to employees about positive performance.
- **Grant more autonomy**, get managers to believe in the value of empowering employees, and equip employees to succeed by clearly explaining their sphere of influence.
- **Create opportunities for social connection** among employees, such as using more team-based work designs or scheduling work so employees can develop friendships.
According to Lisa Brock, in 2002, Overlake Hospital Medical Center ranked below average in patient safety and satisfaction, and employee engagement. Recognizing it could address these issues through accountability, they embarked upon a journey of improvement. Brock shared the following measures that Overlake Hospital Medical Center employed to achieve its goals:

- **Redefining and restating its values**, making them easy to remember as an acronym: ICARE (Integrity, Compassion, Accountability, Respect, Excellence).

- **Using a balanced scorecard** to align organizational goals and finances with patient safety and patient and employee satisfaction. Department scorecards and goals are aligned with the organizational scorecard.

- **Integrating service standards** into employee policies and procedures, including job descriptions and performance evaluations, and conducting ongoing training to equip employees for success.

- **Developing a unique definition of accountability** that creates a paradigm shift. Here's Overlake Hospital Medical Center’s definition: “A personal choice to rise above one’s circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving results.”

- **Creating a management incentive plan** with a pre-approved menu of goals that helps align individual objectives with organizational goals. Full transparency allows all employees to see how each department and department leader is performing. Merit pay for management includes clear criteria for exceeding standards.

- **Hiring for fit**, rather than looking for perfect skill set, with a goal of increasing new hire retention.

- **Defining action-oriented cultural beliefs**: Stay Focused, Live it, Take Action, Reach Out, and Speak Up. Overlake Hospital Medical Center integrated these mottos into new employee orientation, job descriptions and performance evaluations. It also aligned these with employee recognition systems and trained all management on these beliefs.

- **Incorporating storytelling** into all directors’ meetings, employee open forums and staff meetings, focusing on stories about exceptional patient care, extra effort by employees, inspiration, compassion and service.

Today, Overlake Hospital Medical Center is profitable and in the top quartiles for patient safety and satisfaction and employee engagement.
Leading long-term care organizations recognize that a talented and committed workforce is key to efficiently delivering quality care and achieving organizational goals. They also realize that talent management software can help acquire, develop, and retain top talent. Here’s how your organization can incorporate these solutions into its accountability initiative.

Empower managers.
“By training our directors on how to take advantage of Position Manager® and HealthcareSource Staff Assessment℠, we were able to empower them and make them accountable for the interview process.” – Joann Kaminsky, Director of Employment and Employee Relations at Uniontown Hospital

Make data-driven talent selections.
“With software that helps evaluate competencies and identify top performers, organizations can make hiring decisions based on data instead of gut instinct, and build accountability in from the beginning.” – Molly Weaver, Director of Employment, Children’s Mercy Hospitals & Clinics

Start comparing the data over time.
“You can raise your standards in a systematic way. For example, by tracking employee performance against the aggregate behavioral assessment scores from HealthcareSource to find patterns of those who excel and those who do not, we hope to identify the characteristics and skills needed to succeed within our organization. Plus, with all this employee performance data consolidated, management can work with employees more easily to instill accountability.” – Joann Kaminsky, Director of Human Resources, Uniontown Hospital

Technology’s Role in Enforcing Accountability

Conclusion: Use Accountability to Your Advantage

Long-term care communities of all kinds are constantly seeking new ways to improve employee retention while providing the best care possible to residents and patients. Initiating Employee Accountability programs can help on both fronts. Encouraging caregivers, and other staff, to participate in appropriate facility-wide accountability goals has proven to improve care delivery. In turn, care recipients have reported improved satisfaction rates.

Understandably, some employees will be resistant to the changes associated with establishing a culture of accountability. However, instead of seeing accountability as a burden, view it as an opportunity to elevate workplace performance and in turn improve employee satisfaction and engagement. The organizations that take accountability to heart are the ones setting themselves apart from their competitors by doing more with less, while achieving their strategic goals.

By taking advantage of the recommendations in this white paper to motivate your employees, you can set your organization on the path to success.
About HealthcareSource
With over 1,700 healthcare facilities as clients, HealthcareSource® is the leading provider of talent management software for the healthcare industry. Through its cloud-based solutions, HealthcareSource helps healthcare organizations source, hire, assess, develop and retain the best workforce possible in order to reduce costs and to improve patient satisfaction and safety. The company’s talent management solutions include applicant tracking, onboarding, performance management, behavioral assessments, reference checking, physician recruiting, and candidate sourcing. A private corporation, HealthcareSource focuses exclusively on the healthcare industry and consistently earns high marks for client satisfaction and retention. HealthcareSource was named 2011 category leader for Talent Management KLAS Research.
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