The scores that hospitals receive on the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) Survey are critical to their business success: HCAHPS scores directly translate into increases or decreases in a hospital’s Medicare funding.

Between August and October 2012, HealthcareSource surveyed hospitals nationwide about HCAHPS Survey readiness. We found that many organizations are struggling with HCAHPS. On the one hand, the vast majority (81 percent) of the 292 organizations that responded have a strategic initiative in place to address HCAHPS scores. At the same time, many hospitals are unsure how to interpret HCAHPS results and how to influence employee behaviors to improve their scores.

Our organization has a strategic initiative to address HCAHPS scores.
To become and remain a patient-centric facility, hospitals need to have a strategy for promoting employee behaviors that support HCAHPS and for evaluating employees accordingly. In addition, they need to work continually to implement, promote, review, and adjust those strategies.

“HCAHPS readiness can’t be the flavor of the month, and we can’t think it’s going to go away,” said Susan Grady, owner of SM Grady Strategic Human Resources. “This is a very big part of the financial future of hospitals and a big part of the future of healthcare in our country.”

Performance management is a proven way that hospitals can improve their HCAHPS scores. In this white paper, industry experts discuss performance management best practices in three areas that relate directly to HCAHPS scores:

1. Developing a culture of coaching and improvement.
2. Educating staff about HCAHPS.
3. Defining HCAHPS expectations to hold managers and employees accountable.

Human Resources can play an important role in increasing HCAHPS scores for at least two key reasons:

- HR lies at the intersection of people and business.
- HR is closely connected to strategies that affect talent performance, as well as strategies that are organization-wide, such as specific initiatives for affecting HCAHPS scores.

### About the HealthcareSource HCAHPS Readiness Survey

- Conducted online, August through October 2012
- 19 questions
- 292 responses
- [www.beHCAHPSready.com](http://www.beHCAHPSready.com)

### Survey Participant's Level

- **Director/Manager**: 46%
- **Individual contributor**: 42%
- **VP**: 10%
- **C-level**: 2%

### Participant's Job Category

- **IT**: 1%
- **Clinical**: 21%
- **HR**: 78%
- **Clinical**: 21%
- **IT**: 1%
- **C-level**: 2%
- **Director/Manager**: 46%
- **VP**: 10%
- **Individual contributor**: 42%
- **HR**: 78%
- **Clinical**: 21%
- **IT**: 1%
- **C-level**: 2%
- **Director/Manager**: 46%
- **VP**: 10%
- **Individual contributor**: 42%
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- **IT**: 1%

HR has a specific initiative for affecting HCAHPS scores.
A good first step to support HCAHPS efforts is to cultivate a culture that is focused on coaching and performance improvement. Grady observed that healthcare organizations often comprise small groups of employees with different areas of expertise. These groups aren’t necessarily trained to work together, yet patients and families are looking for teamwork among caregivers.

Having the tools to help create and sustain a culture of coaching and HCAHPS performance improvement is one thing. Developing an environment in which coaching and continuous performance improvement are the norm is another. Four tactics can help develop that kind of environment:

1. **Brief the C-suite about HCAHPS**

A culture of coaching and improvement begins with the CEO, CFO, and CNO. HR is the ideal party for briefing the C-suite about the organizational impact of HCAHPS. One outcome of these discussions could be to identify an HCAHPS champion for the hospital. This should be someone with the skills and competencies to partner with the entire organization. It may or may not be someone in HR. Regardless, the champion should develop a clear and simple plan for addressing HCAHPS.

2. **Define HCAHPS service excellence competencies**

Dr. Frederick Morgeson, Professor of Management and Valade Research Scholar in the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, recommended three steps to help hospitals clearly define the service excellence competencies that hospitals need to achieve high HCAHPS scores:

- **Step 1**: Recognize how HCAHPS scores are calculated. This means understanding both global and summary measures (e.g., communication with nurses and doctors, staff responsiveness, and pain management).

- **Step 2**: Identify the employee behaviors that affect those metrics. For example, patients are more likely to have a positive experience when employees engage in active listening, are helpful and empathetic, and show respect.

- **Step 3**: Understand how employee behaviors that are linked to the HCAHPS summary measures relate to the hospital’s overall mission and values. Alignment must exist between workforce competencies and the hospital’s goals, values, and mission.

**Key Leadership Competencies in Healthcare**

Leadership is different in healthcare organizations than in other industries. When healthcare executives and managers exhibit the following 10 key competencies, they are more likely to have satisfied employees, which translates into better patient care, greater patient satisfaction, and higher HCAHPS scores:

1. Customer orientation
2. Innovative thinking
3. Conscientiousness
4. Achievement orientation
5. Emotional evenness
6. Openness to change
7. Self-confidence
8. Multi-tasking
9. Self-development
10. Critical thinking
3. Embed HCAHPS in employee and departmental routines

One way to embed HCAHPS into the work environment is to create a Service Excellence Council. Brian Lee, founder and CEO of Custom Learning Software and the Healthcare Service Excellence Conference, suggested that 60 percent of the council should come from management and 40 percent should be front-line workers. He also recommended that the CNO or director of nursing chair the group.

Other techniques for embedding HCAHPS into employee routines include monthly DOIT (daily ongoing improvement tactics) meetings and weekly stand-up service huddles. In these meetings and huddles, teams share what they have learned about patient expectations and HCAHPS, as well as how they will address those issues.

“When every unit holds these meetings,” said Lee, “it actively engages the entire organization in improving the patient experience.”

4. Align HCAHPS service excellence competencies with HR software

Talent management software, including performance management software, must be aligned with the employee behaviors needed to increase HCAHPS scores. Without this alignment, employees won’t engage in necessary behaviors.

“Technology can introduce structure into the work environment,” observed Morgeson. “Formalizing processes increases the probability that employees will take the right action. This is especially true when delegating decisions and processes to lower levels in the organization.”

Formal technology-based solutions help people correctly perform processes every time. Standardization and repeatability are the keys to being successful.

Educate Staff About HCAHPS

Employees need education and the right tools before they can be held accountable for — and meet — HCAHPS goals.

“Individuals need to see HCAHPS as something that is meaningful to them and important to their jobs,” noted Grady. “Hospitals have to educate employees about how patients perceive quality and how to place the patient at the center of everything they do.”

If organizations want their staff to understand HCAHPS-related expectations, their employees need to know the “what” and “why” of HCAHPS. Below are three ways to be sure hospital employees have that knowledge.

1. Provide easy access to training materials

The HealthcareSource HCAHPS Readiness Survey found that 56 percent of front-line employees and 40 percent of managers have been trained on what HCAHPS is and what it means. Healthcare is a 24/7 environment. Holding traditional classroom training and offering it only during the typical 9-to-5 workday isn’t going to be successful in a hospital environment. All employees — managers and front-line workers — must have easy access to HCAHPS-related training and development resources. One way to improve access to HCAHPS training is through technology, such as learning management software.

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<td>Overall rating of hospital</td>
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<td>Patients who would recommend the hospital to friends and family</td>
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<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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2. Engage all employees in training

Every hospital employee should be educated about HCAHPS.

“There’s a big myth that patient satisfaction and HCAHPS is a nursing problem,” observed Lee. “In reality, every employee is a caregiver, so we need a bigger-picture understanding of how we train employees on HCAHPS.”

One approach to engaging all employees is to train 5 percent of the staff to lead an HCAHPS service excellence workshop for their peers. Every employee should be required to participate in this type of workshop once a year. It’s important not to forget special employee populations, such as physicians and hospital leaders. For example, the HealthcareSource HCAHPS Readiness Survey found that although 84 percent of nurses are included in service excellence training for HCAHPS, the rate falls to 50 percent among physicians and mid-level employees.

Lee suggested four techniques for engaging physicians in HCAHPS education:

- Schedule a free lunch or dinner with a presentation from an outside expert.
- Respect physicians’ time by limiting each in-person training session to no more than an hour. Consider e-learning, which doctors can complete at their convenience.
- Send a report directly to the physician’s home that compares their HCAHPS score for doctor communication with that of his or her peers.
- Challenge doctors to set an annual goal for HCAHPS scores related to doctor communication.

Hospital managers must also be knowledgeable about HCAHPS and know ways to lead their teams to create patient satisfaction. Unfortunately, many healthcare organizations see leadership development as a one-time event — taking a class or seminar and being done with the training. To be effective, leadership development needs to be an ongoing program.

Leadership assessment software specifically designed for healthcare organizations can be a good alternative to one-shot classes and seminars. The best software focuses on competencies that are crucial for healthcare leadership, such as customer orientation and openness to change. Leadership assessment software can also be used to evaluate managers and recommend different development activities for them that relate to on-the-job tasks and appeal to different learning styles.

Assessments, meanwhile, enable senior hospital executives to look at their leadership team as a whole, identify their strengths, and define developmental opportunities that will provide the greatest return in terms of increased HCAHPS scores.

3. Test employee competencies related to HCAHPS and track the results

Simply training employees about HCAHPS isn’t enough. Hospitals need to not only test employee competencies related to HCAHPS but also to track the results they see over time. Learning management software can help capture this information in an automated way. Using manual processes to collect and track data wastes valuable resources and increases the risk of non-compliance with HCAHPS standards.
Define HCAHPS Expectations, Then Hold Managers and Employees Accountable

It’s important for hospitals to manage HCAHPS expectations proactively. A good first step is to incorporate HCAHPS goals into job descriptions. This sets a tone that says all employees are expected to embrace a patient-centric culture.

“It is difficult for organizations to meet their financial and quality goals if their job descriptions don’t include HCAHPS expectations,” noted Grady.

Although this is a best practice, it isn’t necessarily the norm. The HealthcareSource HCAHPS Readiness Survey found that only 44 percent of organizations have job descriptions that include HCAHPS goals.

Experts suggest at least three ways to define expectations relating to HCAHPS and to hold managers and front-line employees accountable for meeting HCAHPS goals.

1. Use performance appraisals to hold managers and front-line employees accountable for HCAHPS objectives

Both managers and front-line employees must be held responsible for meeting HCAHPS objectives.

“In most organizations, managers aren’t accountable, and that’s where we have to start.”

Performance appraisals are one proven way to hold employees accountable. Most employees want to do a good job and are open to performance evaluations and performance discussions, when done in the appropriate way.

“We can emphasize accountability through consistent and persistent feedback,” said Grady. “This can be done through formal and informal appraisals, as well as teachable moments.”

Performance management software provides a structure for the evaluation process. When an organization tracks anecdotal staff stories related to HCAHPS in performance management software throughout the year, it is easy to incorporate that information into performance appraisals. By automating aspects of the evaluation process, hospitals can focus on reinforcing HCAHPS education. By comparison, using a manual evaluation process forces organizations to focus on gathering and organizing the various pieces of the evaluations.
2. Strive to provide more positive than negative feedback

Positive and negative feedback should be balanced. Although negative feedback clearly identifies where corrective action is needed, it can also be demotivating. Positive feedback bolsters motivation.

“Decades of research have shown that positive reinforcement is the best way to ensure that a behavior will continue in the future,” said Morgeson. “Positive feedback can be very influential, and most organizations need more of it.”

For every piece of negative feedback given to an employee, managers should provide five pieces of positive feedback. When employees receive positive feedback about HCAHPS-related behaviors, they are more likely to engage in those desirable actions — which will translate into higher HCAHPS scores.

3. Define HCAHPS goals for both departments and employees

HCAHPS goals should be defined at both the department and employee levels. Lee has found that employees must buy into the expectations around HCAHPS before they will accept responsibility for them.

According to the HealthcareSource HCAHPS Readiness Survey, most managers (57 percent) have clearly defined HCAHPS goals for their departments, but only 24 percent of front-line employees have clearly articulated individual performance goals.

One way to generate employee support and understanding for HCAHPS is to have department members read aloud and verbatim the comments and feedback about HCAHPS scores. This often brings abstract ideas to life. Setting HCAHPS goals for front-line employees is essential; these workers represent the greatest risk to patient satisfaction and the greatest opportunity for improving the patient experience.

Establishing HCAHPS goals may seem overwhelming to managers who are already overworked. However, performance management software can automate the development of goals related to patient experiences. Front-line employees can go online to define their individual goals, which managers can edit and approve. This process promotes employee buy-in and streamlines a manager’s workload.
Conclusion

Leading healthcare organizations have found that performance management promotes the employee behaviors that generate patient satisfaction and improved HCAHPS scores. Developing a culture of coaching and performance improvement starts at the top. Service excellence competencies must be an integral part of employee routines and talent management software can help facilitate this process.

Educating hospital staff about HCAHPS and holding them accountable for HCAHPS objectives is also essential. Technology can play a central role in both of these areas. With automation, training can be accessed easily by everyone from clinicians to the hospital’s C-suite. Automating the performance management process also enables leaders to capture employee feedback throughout the year and to structure evaluations. Less time spent on manual processes means more time to devote to HCAHPS education, goal-setting, and performance improvement.

To learn more, take a tour of HealthcareSource Performance Manager®. See how our software improves the employee appraisal process and encourages better communication between staff and managers to ensure employee satisfaction.
About HealthcareSource

With over 2,000 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 software solutions include applicant tracking, learning management, performance management, behavioral assessments, and reference checking. A private corporation, HealthcareSource focuses exclusively on the healthcare industry and consistently earns high marks for client satisfaction and retention. HealthcareSource was named 2012 category leader for Talent Management by KLAS Research, 2012 Healthcare Informatics Top 100 and 2012 Deloitte Technology Fast 500.

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