

Utilizing Change Management in Your Medical Practice

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In part two of this series, learn strategies to effectively enact change at your practice.

In [the first part of our series](#), we identified the problems practices face when change management is an afterthought during times of adjustment or following practice mergers and acquisitions. Today, we discuss successfully utilizing change management techniques in your practice.

Survey the Leadership and Assess Support Levels

Often, there are inaccurate assumptions that the leadership of an organization is on the same page with the changes that will be made in the practice. Assume nothing. If the leadership cannot agree on the vision and plan, the changes and opportunities are destined to fail. All the resources and financial strength in the world will not move the transition forward without leadership embracing the new approaches first to challenge and to motivate the rest of the practice.

No one likes change. It is unsettling at all levels, but it is communication from the leadership and their mutual, unwavering support for the changes at hand that will either calm the waters or create a storm.

The leadership must speak with one voice and model the desired behaviors. The voice and messaging must be publicly consistent 100 percent of the time.

Executive teams that work well together are best positioned for success. They are aligned and committed to the direction of change, understand the culture and behaviors the changes intend to introduce, and can model those changes themselves.

Change Requires Inclusiveness

Identifying change agents at all levels throughout the practice is often overlooked, when it is one of the most important areas to implement. These change agents are rank and file with managers and supervisors supporting their efforts. The day-to-day operational people are incredibly important to help change "cascade" through the organization.

These agents are trained to understand and accept the vision of the practice and have a defined responsibility for part of the project or group of individuals. They must be provided with the tools to execute their specific tasks and motivated to make change happen.

Know why the change is necessary or important

Change is unsettling, and employees will question the need for changes and want information before allowing themselves to commit to something that is uncomfortable for them. They will look to the leadership for answers and need to believe that the leadership is confident the change makes sense. More than just telling the staff about the changes, share with them the rationale behind it. People embrace what they understand; they repel what they don't believe in.



Communicating the Need for Change

There are three steps to this process:

- Present the problem in its current state and concerns for how not implementing change will affect the practice.
- Second, demonstrate the solid path the practice will be on with the new plans; communicate the vision and the leadership's ability to get there.
- Finally, recognize there needs to be a steady implementation that will keep the plans on track.

Explain the process of decision making and roll out at a high level. Target and tailor the messaging for specific departments or roles within the practice with the goal for staff to feel their specific contributions are important and are not an afterthought.

Leadership on Display

Leadership at all levels from the executive board to the front-office supervisor must embrace positivity and exude an air of calm and capability during the transformation. This is more than lip-service buy-in. It demands ownership by leaders accepting responsibility for making change happen in all the areas they influence or control.

Ownership is often best created by involving those who will directly perform the tasks that the change is associated with. Leadership identifying the problem or perhaps, the desired outcome, and encouraging thought sessions by the change agent and their team to exchange ideas and craft the roadmap produces excitement and inclusion that is necessary to move the project forward. Positively working through change is often reinforced by incentives and rewards. These can be financial or through recognition opportunities that encourage continued team work.

Pulse Check the Communications

Executives and change agents often misinterpret the level of understanding others may have of the issues or new practice direction. The best rule of thumb: When you believe there has been sufficient communication about issues and direction, triple it.

The most successful change programs consistently reinforce core messages through a variety of communication sources that is both inspirational and practical. Find ways to make communications fun. Newsletters, e-blasts, and memos are fine, but find ways to be engaging and entertaining in some way too. Send a "Question of the Day" email about a new procedure or change that everyone can answer individually. Those with correct answers go into a drawing for a prize or award points for each correct answer and tally them up for prizes each week. The rewards do not have to be financially complex, but it keeps staff informed while reinforcing the messaging in a way that is entertaining.

Everything Looks Good on Paper

Effectively managing change requires continual reassessment by asking questions and eliciting feedback at all levels of the organization. Being willing to go back to the drawing board without apologies is a key component to long term success. Use data and a solid decision-making process to make the small adjustments when needed to keep driving the overall vision forward.

Keep the "Human" in Human Resources

Change is not only about the practice moving forward; it is incredibly personal to your largest and most important resource: your staff. Many employees equate their contributions and success at work to who they are as people. They need to know how their work will change, what is expected of them during and after the change program, how they will be measured, and what success or failure will mean for them and those around them.

Team leaders should be as honest and explicit as possible, even when they are uncertain. If there is a likelihood that the staffing will be reduced by 10 percent, be honest and communicate that from the start using the tools described. Involve staff at all levels in the

change process and utilize highly visible rewards, such as promotion, recognition, and bonuses, whenever possible as a reinforcement for embracing change.

There needs to be a balance between the business needs and the "soft" side of change management. Using these techniques combined with understanding there is a need to embrace the human need for support and communication through times of change is what will set up longevity with your staff long after the changes to your practice have been established.

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