

Healthcare: The Highest Form of Hospitality

When we look at the word “hospitality”, it is no coincidence that “hospital” encompasses most of it. I firmly believe that healthcare is the highest form of hospitality. This word typically generates images of hotels, restaurants, and spas. Many people in the healthcare industry, however, don’t think of themselves as hospitality professionals. Having the honor to impact a person and their family’s life in a deeply memorable manner is a great position to be in. In the hotel industry, people don’t NEED to stay at hotels. Not getting upgraded to a suite or receiving a warm bottle of champagne can hardly be considered life-threatening emergencies. With healthcare, people need you. As such, there is a large social responsibility that goes along with being a healthcare professional. Regardless of what position you may have (nurse, physician, receptionist, housekeeper, department manager), you directly impact the service experience that patients receive.

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As a service excellence consultant/trainer, my clients are in disciplines ranging from public school systems to commercial real estate. Many, however, are in healthcare...by far. Without fail, the consistent question that I get is “Does this service excellence stuff really apply to Healthcare”? It doesn’t matter if it’s a health system, hospital, dentist office, community health center, or senior living community. My answer is always the same...Yes! The universal concepts, tools, and practices of service excellence are not only transferable, but in an ideal scenario, the healthcare industry should be the global trend-setters in the area. From my work with various organizations, I have found that the most effective ones establish, develop, and sustain a culture of service excellence by focusing on three areas:

- Setting the foundation for service excellence
- Enhancing the patient experience
- Gaining physician involvement



Setting the Foundation

When building a house, one of the first major construction activities is laying the foundation. Great care is taken to build an extremely strong foundation with the right materials, and with the right people doing the work. Only then, can the rest of the house be built. A weak foundation equals a weak house, and a strong foundation equals a strong house. Even if a massive storm blows through, everything else may topple, but the foundation should still remain. It should be sturdy, unshakable, and reliable.

The same is true of an organizational foundation. For service excellence to be considered a priority in the healthcare setting, it must be a key piece of the foundation. The foundation includes elements such as the mission, core values, and operating principles. I have seen many healthcare institutions boast their newly created mission which its executives worked so tirelessly to craft. Even with a supremely articulate mission statement on their walls (with a gold frame no doubt), they may still not be a systematic and sustainable change in service delivery. Why? Most times, the answer lies with what I call the “key”. This key unlocks the organizational service potential that lies within. I am referring to the organization’s senior leadership team. Of course, the CEO is not out there treating the patients, but believe it or not, that person along with his/her team of senior leaders impact how that patient is treated and what type of service experience all patients receive.

To put it as plain as possible, the priorities of senior leaders become the priorities for the rest of the organization. If providing patients with a memorable service experience is not critically important for the senior leadership team, then it won’t be critically important for their direct reports, and subsequently, the organization. Some CEO’s mistakenly believe that showing “support” means writing a memo to endorse the service initiative. Drafting a memo does not come close to tirelessly proclaiming that the push for world-class service will not go away. Sending a memo is a nice start, but the real impact is seeing all senior leaders modeling the service behavior they want to see replicated. That means not blindly walking by people in the hallway (patients and staff), and that also means using people’s names, and continuously looking for ways to not just meet, but exceed expectations. The service mission has to be talked about...all the time. It can’t, under any circumstances, be perceived as just another “flavor of the month”.

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The staff will soon realize that striving for service excellence is here to stay when they see their senior leaders:

- Consistently reward those who deliver memorable service as defined by the patient.
- Hold non-conformers accountable (management and line staff)
- Make “service excellence” a part of daily informal conversations around the institution. (use regular team huddles if you need to)
- Include the topic of “service excellence” in all meetings (yes, even the financial meetings).
- Regularly spotlight examples of “service excellence” as performed by the staff in places like the company newsletter, Intranet, and bulletin boards.

This all sounds good, but still may not be sufficient. What will truly move the service needle from *good to great*; then from *great to world-class*? The answer may very well be a hearty dose of dissatisfaction.

As I say in all of my classes, “Dissatisfaction fuels Action”. When there is enough dissatisfaction with the current state, then action can begin to take place. This is true not only of organizational improvement, but of personal improvement as well. Think about it, whether the dilemma is weight loss, saving money or taking that long-awaited vacation, it is the dissatisfaction with the present that drives action to accomplish something in the future. It doesn’t mean that the dissatisfaction is a bad thing. Most world-class healthcare organizations that I am familiar with are so pre-occupied with the grander visions of the organization’s future, that they have self-imposed a healthy mixture of current appreciation and dissatisfaction for the status quo. These forward thinking healthcare providers know that patients and workforce talent have a myriad of choices of where they choose to go, so the big differentiator lies not only with which institution has the fanciest equipment, but who is known for taking special care of those within that institution.

Patient Experience



Regardless if the situation is a painful hangnail or a terminal illness, the service experience is ultimately defined by the patient.

Interestingly enough, that service experience rarely has much to do with how many credentials a care provider may have or how new the equipment may be. It is the feeling of being genuinely cared for and the staff’s ability to anticipate needs that sets the service experience apart from the norm. We all “know” this is important but how can we

take it from the realm of superficially interesting (but fundamentally insignificant), to the realm of critically important? It starts with each care provider, from the CEO on down, defining in clear terms, what defines service excellence in their respective roles.

Questions to ask yourself are:

- Who is my primary customer? (could be internal or external)
- What does that customer expect? (how do I know?)
- What are all the various ways I interact with that customer? (these are your touchpoints)
- How can I enhance each of those touchpoints?
- What can I do to make each service touchpoint a memorable one?

Delivering service in a manner that conveys empathy is one of the best ways for the care provider to connect with the patient on an emotional level. Giving updates and briefing the patients on the status of their condition and tests may also contribute to a caring atmosphere. Stating, “I can only imagine how you must feel” and “I’m here for you” can work as well, depending on the situation of course. Proactively taking an interest in the patient’s family and learning about their hobbies and other interests can convey empathy. We can write down an entire list of what can be done to show empathy, but the actions won’t be genuine unless there is a naturally empathetic care provider doing the empathizing. Otherwise, the potentially memorable service interaction can spiral into a

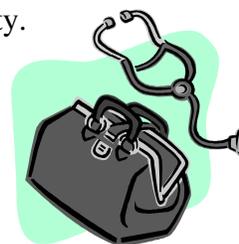
robotic and emotionally placid experience. Ensure that the right people are in the right positions to create memorable experiences.

Physician Involvement

I have heard some healthcare executives say that hospitals don't have patients, physicians do. The assumption is that the hospital's primary customer is the physician, and in order to stay competitive, the physicians must view the hospital (or any other institution) as a worthy place to practice medicine.

We all know that physicians create enormous value for the institution by building lasting bonds with patients. Often times, their alliance to a particular institution is influenced by their personal alignment to the organization's values, and their confidence in its key leaders. In other words, physicians make a personal decision to work with healthcare leaders who make them feel good about practicing medicine at their facility.

A popular quality management principle is to involve stakeholders in the planning of the work that affects them. As a primary stakeholder, involve physicians in matters such as strategic planning and recognition activities. The management team should be encouraged to attend medical staff meetings to ensure alignment and cohesiveness. Building ongoing opportunities for candid communication between physicians and the management team can help bring down the invisible wall that exists in many healthcare institutions.



The same best practices that have made stellar reputations for various hotel and retail companies are just as applicable for those in healthcare. Healthcare organizations like Bronson Methodist Hospital, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton, and Baptist Hospital, Inc. were all winners of the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (the nation's only presidential award for organizational performance excellence). They are proof that service excellence is not only attainable in healthcare, but can also be performed on a world class level. When it comes to the health of ourselves and our loved ones, we all desire the best service experience possible. It is time for all healthcare organizations to claim their rightful place as leaders and trend-setters in the delivery of world-class service.

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