Staff Motivation
Key Challenge for Team Success

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Some time ago, I ran a survey to determine the top four challenges associated with the position of administrator. Staff motivation was among the top contenders. Just how does one go about working through this challenge? How do you take a group of people who seemingly have little motivation and turn them into a highly motivated team?

The answer to this question is elusive at best and impossible at worst. Remember, as administrators, we are expected to accomplish the difficult things immediately, and nothing is considered to be impossible. Motivation is a very complex issue and has a number of facets that make it particularly difficult to achieve. Is it then impossible? The short answer is no. One must understand that although what motivates one person will likely not work for everyone in the group, successful teams begin with buy-in to a set of common goals.

Common goals are the foundation
To begin, staff motivation is about sharing common goals. Of course, to share the goals, one must first be able to identify them. All too often, management is so involved with putting out fires, they completely lose sight of the idea that the main goal was to build a fire station or perhaps something as mundane as simply finding a hose.

Unfortunately, the doctors are so involved with the practice of medicine, they make a lot of assumptions about the staff members sharing the goals of the providers. While this might be admirable, this attitude is not very realistic. The providers’ number one goal is to care for the patient. The number one goal of the staff should be to support the providers by facilitating outstanding provider care for the patient.
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Yet all too often the staff gets caught up with the basic issues of “the paperwork” and loses sight of their real reason for existence. Once this confusion is allowed to permeate the organization, the gap between the providers and the support staff only continues to widen and neither group seems capable of identifying the problem, much less the solution. While each appears to be working as diligently as possible, providers and staff will continue to grow apart until turnover starts to become prevalent. New people will be hired, but without the proper training and set of expectations identified by management, these new staff members are destined to fall into the same trap, and the vicious cycle continues.

Your role
The new administrator must start with the basics: identification of the practice’s goals and then determination of a methodology for instilling these in ways that achieve “buy-in” from the staff. This is an ongoing, continuous process. Goals can never be “overidentified.” The successful administrator will guide the practice personnel as well as the providers through a process of goal identification and then through a strategic planning process where both management and providers are successful in not only the identification of goals for the practice, but also the identification of the methods of obtaining the goals.

A great deal of planning goes into this very challenging process. Once proper goals are identified, they should be articulated and further identified for the entire staff in a very clear, concise manner.

Your responsibility
The strategic planning that has just taken place should be shared with the staff in a manner that makes both the goals and the resource allocation to achieve them quite clear. With these ideas properly identified, every action the organization now takes should be evaluated against the practice’s goals—and this correspondence should be at the forefront of every staff member’s thinking.

Many physicians, however, question the idea of strategic planning. They might feel that something as basic as just “doing your job” should be so elementary that it requires no planning. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. It is the very lack of this fundamental training that works against the success of the practice.

When new employees are brought into the organization, it is imperative that they understand the reason for the practice’s existence and their specific role within this process. Without this information, they will tend to make up their own rules for the way that both they and the organization should function. These “made up” rules will be part truth and part fiction, and the line between the two will be very blurred. You can imagine the confusion that will exist. Obviously, this is a recipe for failure. Now, we truly have a situation where the “inmates are running the asylum!”

The highly effective team, on the other hand, functions in direct relationship to its understanding of the organization’s goals as well as the team’s goals. Team members are comfortable in their understanding of individual as well as collective contributions. They take pride in what they contribute and are excited to see the organization succeed.

Creating a paradigm shift
Just how does the new administrator make this happen? Fortunately, when a new administrator comes on board, everyone expects some changes to be made. Since change is expected, this is the perfect time to initiate the planning process.

Some will resist the proposed changes vigorously. Ultimately, some of these people might fall by the wayside because of their unwillingness to support the practice’s goals. This is unfortunate, but the organization can never be successful with this sort of dissent and will ultimately be better served without these people, no matter the perception that they are indispensible.

The others will come alongside the new administrator in various degrees and begin to support the goals that are identified. Once it is evident the changes are there to stay, the paradigm shift has begun. It is now a matter of continuing to identify and hone the skills necessary to have a highly effective, functioning team of motivated individuals. We keep score and continually re-evaluate our progress, making necessary changes to our strategies.

It is a never-ending battle.