

Advisor Article

Building Upon Past Successes in Culture Change

NYAHS Human Resources Conference tackles “culture change” issues.

In a session entitled: Culture Change: An HR Perspective, attendees explored the unique role that a nursing home human resources (HR) department might play in culture change. The basic premise of the discussion was that in many ways nursing homes have already successfully effected past cultural transformations and may already have in place many elements of the current culture change movement. Instead of looking at culture change as something totally new, which can be somewhat overwhelming, facilities should instead look at building upon past successes.

Culture change is generally defined as shifting from a medical or hospital-based model of care to a “person-directed care model”. Culture change is a critical part of the AAHSA *Quality First Initiative*. Supporters believe that enhancing the lives of elders through culture change goes hand in hand with improving the working environment for caregivers. In this regard, there is a strong connection between culture change and the HR function in nursing homes.

Critical to the notion of any culture transformation is a fundamental shift in the way in which people perceive and think about their work environment. This is nothing new to nursing homes. Attendees at the session were able to come up with a list of past examples in which nursing homes very successfully accomplished such transformations, including: the shift to case mix reimbursement systems, the adoption of the OBRA standards, the implementation of restraint-free environments, the implementation of subacute care, and the shift away from polypharmacy. All of these can be looked at as major cultural transformations in nursing home care. Another premise of the discussion was that the same strategies, tools, and the experience and insights gained in these prior cultural shifts could apply equally well to the current model.

One prior cultural shift in which the HR department, in particular, played a lead role occurred in the early 1990s when nursing homes began implementing enhanced safety programs. In light of rising workers’ compensation costs and increased scrutiny by OSHA, nursing homes began a major shift towards a “culture of safety.” This session found that indeed there are significant parallels. Critical to success in both cases is that fundamental shift in the way people think about doing their jobs.

Some of the basic lessons that can be taken from the past HR experience in developing a safety mindset and applied to the culture change challenge include:

- Emphasizing the importance of communications and staff involvement;
- Creating an environment in which staff are receptive to change;
- Making physical changes that reinforce the cultural shift;
- Providing the tools and education necessary to empower staff;

- Leadership that sets the example and inspires;
- Demonstrating the ultimate benefit of the changes;
- Maintaining a long-term commitment;
- Acknowledging positive developments;
- Setting incremental goals and allowing for occasional set-backs; and
- Ultimate buy-in to the fact that there is an improved or enhanced way of doing things.

Creating a new culture of employee safety in the nursing home may have seemed like an overwhelming task to many facilities a few years ago. Today, ergonomic standards, hazard communications programs, personal protective equipment, and numerous other changes that needed be implemented in nursing homes have become a routine part of the way in which nursing home employees think about doing their jobs. Most importantly, in general facilities have been very successful in making this cultural shift.

It is also important to keep in mind that in many ways facilities have already implemented aspects of the current culture change model, perhaps without even realizing it. Indeed, attendees at the session were able to list numerous areas in which their facilities have implemented aspects of culture change, even in those facilities that have not formally adopted the model. Along with building upon past experience, facilities need to also build upon culture change successes they may already have in place.

Sometimes the language surrounding the culture change movement can make the prospect of embarking on “the journey” seem overwhelming. The main goal of this presentation was to present the culture change journey in very practical terms, looking to build upon past experience and accomplishments. Instead of viewing it as some radical change, in may serve some facilities well to think in terms of cultural change as one more step in the ongoing evolution of nursing home care.

For additional questions on this presentation please contact Patrick Cucinelli, Senior Financial Policy Analyst.

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