

Practice Makes Perfect

A wise physician once commented that the reason we speak of the "practice" of medicine, is because it is just that, a "practice."

Professional athletes and musicians are familiar with the concept that practice makes perfect. Successful business people have known for years that ongoing training is necessary to be able to compete in the marketplace. When Jack Welch took over as CEO of General Electric, he identified the only behavior that is acceptable in GE as that of the "A" player.

Until the last few years, health care organizations weren't viewed as being in a competitive arena. However, the advent of managed care, coupled with abundant opportunities for employees to go elsewhere, have caused their leaders to rethink objectives, both internally and externally. Patients demand an "A Team." and employees look for an "A Team." environment.

The importance of a well-trained team in the health care setting is easily apparent when observing a code-blue or trauma-team activation. The drama of the moment requires people to leave their personalities on the shelf and to function as parts of a well-oiled machine. Not all aspects of everyday operations are as dramatic, but the work that is being done is equally important and still requires an "A Team."

The challenge is creating an organization that nurtures "A Team." players. The starting point is to ensure that managers have the tools they need to create an environment that will attract and retain committed employees. Only with commitment, will significant performance and productivity gains, be achieved, and managers are key to creating that "A Team." environment.

One of the reasons team training may seem to fall short of the mark, is because it is viewed as an event, rather than an on-going process. Learning to work together and to communicate takes time, as well as practice. That is why many efforts at management or leadership training fail to achieve lasting behavioral change. People don't change their behavior as a result of a two or three day training event.

Communication is vital to successful training and teamwork. The work styles of people who are employed in health care are varied. Motivation can be different for doctors than nurses, administrators, or support staff. Everyone wants the same outcome, but why they want it and how they go about getting it are markedly different. And, those differences don't stop with employees. Patients and their families don't come in cookie-cutter packages either.

Not only is it important to communicate with other team members, but also with the patients and their families, because when communication with the patient goes awry, there's more at stake than mere dissatisfaction. The patient may not follow through with necessary medical treatment or understand the proposed procedure. And, when delivering bad news to a patient or family member, the results of poor communication can be particularly unfortunate. What often lingers in patients' minds long after a medical visit is not what the doctor did, however skillful, but what was said and how it was said.

We are living in an age where advanced technology is aimed at improving the science, but only with training or "practice" in building an "A Team" and developing better team and patient communication, will the art of medicine reach its full healing potential.

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