

Affinity Health System – Cultural Transformation in the Context of Sustainability

Affinity Health System is a regional health care provider based in Northeast Wisconsin that is composed of 250 physicians, 26 clinics and three hospitals. The Affinity Health System is committed to providing personalized, community-based care and takes pride in being one of the most sustainable health care providers in the country.

Challenge

Affinity Health System traces its roots back to 1891, when two groups of sisters came to Northeast Wisconsin and built St. Elizabeth Hospital and Mercy Medical Center. Both organizations were founded on a commitment to humility, service, and a desire to provide Christ-centered healing to their patients.

In 1995, these two institutions merged to form Affinity Health System. Upon merging, a new, organization-wide, mission, vision, value system and management philosophy was developed to enable Affinity Health System to better serve its patients. This organizational identity served as the backdrop for Gary Kusnierz (VP of Performance Excellence) to transform the culture of Affinity to embrace both a systems approach to operations and a commitment to sustainability. Gary and his team believed that by integrating systems thinking and sustainability into Affinity's culture, Affinity would be able to provide its patients with a better overall experience.

Strategy

A three-pronged approach to behavior change consisting of Lean Tools, Sustainability Initiatives and Research was used to integrate sustainability into Affinity's culture. Lean Tools are used to organize sustainability efforts and hence provide the framework for Affinity's ISO 14001 Environmental Management System. This Lean-based framework is then reinforced by initiative-specific research, meant to facilitate top notch customer care.

To assure that sustainability was integrated at a departmental level, a sustainability-oriented cross-functional team was created. This team is composed of 20 members who represent every department in the hospital. The team serves both to unify Affinity's overall environmental effort as well as to help facilitate environmental efforts within each representative's respective department.



Lean Tools are also used to empower employees in the context of individual action. Once the Environmental Management System was established, a mandatory computer-based training program ensured system-wide awareness of Affinity's sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, optional Lean and Environmental Certification programs were developed to teach employees how to use Lean techniques to identify and resolve environmental risks. Upon completion of the Environmental Certification Program, participants are deemed "Environmental Champions" and become eligible to conduct "Environmental Reviews," or audits.

Once a month, Environmental Champions and their teams are invited to present their accomplishments at a monthly "Kaizen Report" – a Lean Tool used to share knowledge and provide recognition. At these events, Environmental Champions and their teams receive feedback from the Executive Board. This feedback ensures that management is part of the feedback loop.

Results

Since rolling out the Environmental Management System in February 2012, more than 20 Environmental Champions have been certified at Affinity. These Environmental Champions have since become the movers of the cultural transformation taking place. When conducting audits, Environmental Champions question traditional systems of operation and have the tools and the resources to develop and explain alternative solutions which present economic, environmental and patient care benefits. The success of the Environmental Champions is helping to grow the popularity of the Environmental Management System at Affinity.

According to Gary, although significant internal time investments were necessary to bring about cultural change at Affinity, the benefits have outweighed the costs. Since implementing their Environmental Management System – and hence initiating the cultural transformation – Affinity has formally measured and documented increased employee and patient satisfaction.

Furthermore, he notes that since system-wide awareness initiatives were started, interdepartmental coordination has been increasingly more fluid and productive.

As with any change, this transition has not been easy, and at times Gary and his team have met resistance. According to Gary, the only way to address resistance is with managerial rigor, staff empowerment, and with the continual confirmation that these cultural changes are necessary to better serve the needs of the patient.

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