

A.I.M.* For Excellence

Look at the title and you've probably slapped your forehead and said, "Duh!" Of course, any medical group worth its salt aims for excellence. But aiming and achieving are not always synonymous. The secret to delivering excellence whether it's clinical excellence or service excellence is *structure*.

No need to make the case for the structure of clinical guidelines or protocols here since multiple studies have proven that when variation is eliminated from processes, quality improves. However, many leaders are uncertain how to improve service quality in their medical groups or hospitals. It's easier than you'd expect.

The secret is structure.

Too many medical groups chase after excellent service in a willy-nilly fashion. If patients complain about long wait times, suddenly there's a campaign afoot to push the slowpoke doctor(s) to run faster. If patients are frustrated with long phone waits, the knee jerk response is to investigate the cost of adding more phone lines. There's a better way.

Assess

The ideal approach to improving service quality is to objectively assess current service levels among customers. This means polling patients, practice insiders (physicians and staff members) and referring physicians.

But surveys don't always give a full picture of the service delivered by your team. For the real lowdown on what it's like to be a patient at a practice, engage a team of "mystery" patients, who go through a full encounter-from scheduling an appointment and experiencing the greeting to rooming, examination and check-out. The report to the practice is illuminating and, combined with other patient feedback, it can be instructive. Other assessment

opportunities include calls from these mystery patients that are conducted during various parts of the day to identify operator/scheduler phone etiquette. Patient focus groups are also helpful.

Before launching one of these initiatives, set priorities for improvement.

Improve

After twenty-five years of research, SullivanLuallin has concluded that many practice administrators dread implementing new approaches. It's fear of the unknown, particularly the indefinite costs associated with making improvements. "What will two more phone lines or three more staff members set us back?" frugal physicians may ask.

However, the least expensive, most effective means to boosting patient satisfaction survey scores is to improve the performance of physicians and staff members. This is easily done by communicating expectations and holding folks accountable.

Protocols are a major component of quality.

While physicians at one time railed against what they called "cookbook" medicine, more accept the validity of proven processes that result in consistent, superior outcomes.

Protocols have a place in service excellence as well. Just as a phlebotomist has a set of steps to follow while drawing blood, a nurse or receptionist should have a process for greeting or rooming a patient. These required steps include smiling, introducing oneself and using the patient's name.

Improved service quality results when these protocols - and techniques that make patients feel like valued customers - are introduced to staff members during training sessions or other formal

environments. During these events, sharing insights from mystery patient calls and visits can make training sessions come alive and stimulate further discussion.

To ensure that staff members follow protocols and other scripts, managers need to keep employees energized and engaged. Service quality workshops for managers emphasize the techniques that motivate employees and hold them accountable. Providers need a reminder as well.

For individual physicians who want to improve but don't understand what it takes, one-on-one shadow coaching can help. A professional shadow accompanies the doctor as he or she goes through each patient visit. With approval of the patient at the outset, the shadow coach stands unobtrusively in the corner of the exam room observing the interaction between physician and patient. Throughout the day, the coach gives feedback to the doctor regarding what he or she is doing well and what things he or she could avoid.

Maintain

Keeping the spotlight on service is the third step to world class service. The key is to focus on service every day. Successful, service oriented-practices begin each day with a five minute huddle to discuss what the expected schedule demands will be and how to prepare. They end the huddle with a quick reminder of the service protocol of the day: "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

SullivanLuallin has found that practices with the highest scores on patient surveys monitor satisfaction quarterly or monthly and share the results with physicians and staff. Incentives for achievement of thresholds motivate departments to go the extra step for patients. Kaiser San Diego, for example, has implemented a program where their own patients serve as mystery shoppers and share the reports with physicians and staff.

A few practice professionals ask patients with compelling success stories of care and healing to return to the practice to share experiences with the staff. Nicole Tuite, from Kaiser Woodland Hills implemented this effort. She found that in addition to a few tearful handshakes, there was a sense of renewed enthusiasm and pride on the part of the physicians and staff for their outstanding quality and service. — Meryl Luallin, SullivanLuallin

