TRANSFORMING PHYSICIAN ENGAGEMENT:
Five Ways to Improve Your Approach

Physician participation in the identification and engagement of grateful patients and families is critical to elevating health care philanthropy. Yet, physician engagement in philanthropy remains a challenge for many organizations.

The reason isn’t for a lack of trying.

In 2007, Advisory Board published a groundbreaking study stating 88% of the largest philanthropic gifts to health care are made by patients and family members, prompting health care philanthropy organizations to launch “grateful patient programs.” When the 2013 HITECH Act expanded access to Protected Health Information (PHI)—such as area of clinical service and treating physician name—physician training and referral programs were launched with varying degrees of success.

Albert Einstein famously stated, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” With physician engagement in philanthropy, the intent isn’t going to change, but the approach can. Here’s how:

1. Keep the focus on gratitude
Gratitude has been the subject of numerous workplace studies and is scientifically proven to improve psychological health, increase feelings of joy and happiness and increase purpose, satisfaction and engagement¹. With 42% of physicians experiencing burnout², gratitude should be explored with physicians not only because it can reduce burnout but also because gratitude is multi-directional. Dr. Robert Emmons, the world’s foremost researcher on gratitude states “…conversations about gratitude in health care almost exclusively explore the patient’s response to

¹https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201409/the-psychology-gratitude
receiving care, yet patients aren’t the only ones touched by gratitude."

Instead of focusing on “fundraising,” physician conversations should focus on gratitude and explore physician experiences with grateful patients. This opens up an entirely different type of conversation where you will often hear physicians express sincere appreciation, revitalized enthusiasm for their medical practice and renewed interest in building a closer relationship with the philanthropy team.

2 Focus on quality over quantity
Successful physician engagement requires time, meticulous attention to detail and steadfast effort—so, it’s important to not only ensure the right physician partners are engaged but also to ensure the philanthropy team has the bandwidth, resources and intent to support each relationship well. Many programs fail to right-size their approach, leaving philanthropic gift advisor pipelines clogged with more intended physician partners than staff can meaningfully and sustainably engage. Philanthropic gift advisors should generally aim to engage three to eight physician partners and to have no more than two assigned service lines and/or care sites.

3 Give physicians the opportunity to provide real input on the case for support
Asking a physician to partner with the philanthropy team to raise money for something she is not personally passionate about or invested in drives the same outcome as a donor being asked to provide a gift for something he doesn’t care about. While philanthropic funding priorities should always be strategically-aligned with the vision and ambitions of the supported, health care organization; once funding priorities are selected, physician partners should be recruited from these areas. Then, cases for support outline specific projects within these service lines or areas of service that both have donor appeal and align with each physician partner’s area of focus or passion.

4 Focus on accepting before connecting
A recent NRC Health and Accordant Philanthropy study found 62% of health care consumers express gratitude to someone in the health care organization. Yet, physicians often deflect these expressions of thanks by responding with something like, “I’m just doing my job.” This leaves patients feeling rebuffed or dismissed. Therefore, the first step in engaging physicians in philanthropy is showing them how to accept gratitude in a way that is authentic, personal and reciprocal rather than rote, dismissive or downplaying. Once accepting gratitude becomes natural, it’s much easier to engage physicians in connecting patients and families with philanthropy.

5 Don’t worry if a physician doesn’t make a gift...at first
“Shouldn’t physician partners be giving?” This question becomes a common stumbling block in identifying physician partners. However, if physicians give time to identify grateful patients or share their commitment to the case for support with donors, they ARE giving. Philanthropy is time, talent AND treasure. The time a physician shares has more value than any participatory financial gift. And, once a physician becomes involved through giving input on the case for support and identifying and spending time with grateful patients and families who share their vision for transforming the organization and the community, he will typically invest in the project himself.

Philanthropy starts at the bedside. It begins between a physician and a patient or family member when the physician provides something of value that sparks gratitude. What happens after this must be thoughtfully facilitated and supported by the philanthropy professional. Therefore, how you engage physicians to meaningfully participate in philanthropy makes all the difference.

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