



# PHYSICIAN ENGAGEMENT

## It Takes More Than Training to Engage Essential Connectors

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No two words in healthcare philanthropy elicit more buzz than physician engagement. Physician participation in development can be a powerful catalyst in advancing grateful patient giving, and The Advisory Board Company says 2/3 of top US hospital foundations rank physician engagement as the most important factor in their ability to raise significant funds. Yet, the Association for Healthcare Philanthropy says even organizations that rank physician engagement as their most important strategic initiative recognize much potential remains untapped.

The rationale for physician engagement is clear. The Advisory Board Company says 88% of the largest gifts to healthcare organizations come from grateful patients or their family members. This makes fundamental sense, as grateful patients have a deeper understanding of the value the healthcare organization offers than others. Further, several studies show physicians have more influence on a grateful patient's decision to give than anyone else within the healthcare organization.

Despite the clear advantage of physician engagement in philanthropy, truly engaging physicians in the philanthropic process eludes many development executives. Many organizations' grateful patient strategies overlook or understate the role of physicians. Others fumble in implementing this key strategy fully or well—often because all the pieces of a high performing physician engagement program may not be immediately apparent. However, this effort is worthy of a deliberate and comprehensive approach that goes beyond training strategies and also embraces CEO engagement, development officer preparedness and thoughtful resource allocation.

Many engagement efforts begin and end with inviting clinicians to participate in training sessions to build their knowledge and skills. While training can provide genuine value, no training program alone can miraculously achieve a fully realized physician engagement effort...because training programs are only as good as what takes place before and after the training.

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A key first step in supporting physician engagement is achieving CEO endorsement. Today's healthcare environment demands physician involvement in many strategic efforts for the healthcare organization, so it is imperative to secure CEO buy-in and active participation to bring physicians to the table, to place their role in strategic context and to underscore the importance of this ambition. If the CEO doesn't believe in what you are trying to do, no one else will—and especially not physicians.

Many approaches to physician engagement forget a critical factor in driving engagement – YOU. Strong and prepared development leaders secure and sustain physician engagement by building trusting and collaborative relationships that change mindset and behavior. Development officers also facilitate coaching and mentoring that is more effective than mass training for fostering higher levels of physician participation and generating grateful patient referrals from physicians. Thus, investments in strategic gift officer training geared toward supporting physician engagement not only position individuals to be more successful but also empower the organization to take control of the relationship building and engagement process.

It is also important for the development organization to allocate proper resources to support gift officers in this work over the long haul. Managing physician relationships takes devotion and diligence. Physician relationships must be handled with the same commitment and focus it takes to develop and maintain relationships with major gift prospects. Consistency and persistence are also important; this is not something that can be started and abandoned when things get busy or other things come up.

The bottom line is that engaging physicians is a complex and multi-faceted process. However, potential benefits are far too great to not prioritize this work. Clinician training alone won't achieve all of your goals; however, what you do to prepare and support your staff to successfully build productive relationships with physicians can make all the difference in achieving your goals.

## 5 THINGS YOU CAN DO NOW:

- 1 Give physician relationships the same level of attention as major gift prospects.
- 2 Utilize rounding not only to visit prospective grateful patient donors but also to spend quality face-time with physicians on their turf in their care setting.
- 3 Hold major gift officers accountable; utilize metrics to measure how much time they spend in the hospital interacting with, communicating with and making face-to-face visits with clinician champions.
- 4 Communicate in a consistent, tailored way with each clinician champion.
- 5 Celebrate the success of physician champions and the impact they are having.

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### About the Author:

Erin Stitzel, CFRE, is a Senior Consultant with Accordant Philanthropy. She specializes in creating and implementing grateful patient strategies and in fostering clinician engagement in philanthropy with physicians, nurses and other frontline caregivers.

