

Just a Spoonful of Gratitude Helps the Culture Improve

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“Not another day! Not another day!” I recall these lines from a TV commercial (but ironically, I don’t recall the product) where a parrot repeated these words his owner said on a daily basis as he prepared to go to work. I remember thinking that I could relate to that poor parrot owner and felt like getting out of bed to face another day at work was a Herculean effort. It wasn’t that I didn’t love what I did. It wasn’t that I didn’t love my colleagues. It was that the culture had really deteriorated and I had lost respect for the leadership that either didn’t notice the decline in morale or didn’t care. Neither option was acceptable.

Culture was a tricky subject prior to the pandemic, but it has become even more challenging during this new remote world in which many of us find ourselves working. Our sense of common purpose, belonging and identity have eroded by not being physically around our colleagues. For those who are working in person and on the frontlines of patient care, the unprecedented pandemic environment has created stressful work situations that threaten the well-being of health care professionals. Perhaps you are seeing this in your own hospital or other health care organization. Or perhaps you are one of those feeling this unbearable stress. It’s time for health care organizations to take their “culture temperature” to be sure that culture isn’t faltering and, therefore, threatening strategy. If you do find your culture is faltering, there are tools to prevent further erosion and even reverse some of the ill effects and habits.

I learned about the importance of positive culture from my father. He was a skillful negotiator and was well-liked by almost everyone he encountered. His patience and kindness were remembered by those around him even though he didn't recognize he had these unique skills. What made him successful in his business endeavors was his ability to treat every person with respect. He may not have agreed with you, but you never felt anger or disgust from him. Even when I wanted him to say something unkind about someone I felt deserved it, he refused, and would often try to think of what that person might have going on in their lives that would prevent him or her from sharing kindness with others. While at the time that was a maddening trait, I now see just how wise my father was. You see, my father had mastered the **art of gratitude** and it permeated every aspect of his life, both personal and professional. He was grateful for the little gifts that he believed everyone brought into his world and he let them know.

Gratitude is at the heart of a healthy, values-based culture and can be the valuable tool we use to stop culture deterioration. This isn't just a hunch, as we now have research on gratitude proving its benefits on physiological and psychological health. If you have ever worked in a culture that has veered onto dysfunction junction, you are well aware of how toxic the resulting environment is on staff. It's incredibly difficult to crawl out of the deep hole that a bad culture creates, but it is possible if you have gratitude throughout the organization.



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Gratitude isn't something that should be scoffed at as “warm and fuzzy,” but should instead be pursued as the secret weapon to help build highly functioning cultures. Gratitude works. Think about a time in your professional (or personal) life when someone stopped what they were doing to say, “Thank you.” The validation that simple phrase provides is invaluable. As humans, we need to know our work matters and that WE matter. We have an instinctive nature to be generous with one another and this furthers the concept of gratitude. When something so simple can provide such tremendous benefits, we mustn't take it for granted. We must practice it.



Leaders who are successful at showing genuine gratitude build healthy cultures, but it must involve everyone within the organization to truly move the needle. “Reciprocity” is a key concept of gratitude. Benefits abound on both the person who received the act of kindness and on the person who initiated the act. We see clinical burnout at astonishing rates these days and we are learning that when gratitude is exchanged between coworkers, it helps elevate the culture of that unit/department/hospital to positively impact employee engagement scores. Moreover, when employees are engaged, they are providing excellent care, thereby positively impacting patient experience scores.

Building a healthy values-based culture isn’t simple and it doesn’t happen overnight. But incorporating gratitude into your daily professional activities can go a long way in making your corner of the world a happier and more productive place. Try it and see if a spoonful of gratitude helps your culture improve!

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