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Creating Cultures of Excellence

Gen Guanci MEd, RN-BC, CCRN
Consultant

When you hear the term “cultures of excellence,” what comes to mind? Can you explain it to someone else? Can you see it when you walk into an organization? Would the public be able to recognize it?

Let’s begin with a brief look at what organizational culture is. An organization’s culture is its collective personality. It reflects what elements can and cannot thrive within the organization. Organizational culture can vary from campus to campus, department to department, and even unit to unit. Organizational culture develops over time and, once developed, is often relatively stable until someone decides to focus on changing it. In addition, an organization’s culture is strongly influenced by its leaders.

Organizational culture is often compared to a tree, complete with a deep root system. The visible behaviors and artifacts are like the leaves of the tree. A dress code is an example of this level of culture. We can change the behaviors or artifacts, just as many trees change and even lose their leaves, but the tree remains the same kind of tree, regardless of whether it has green leaves, yellow and orange leaves, or no leaves.

The next level of organizational culture, the beliefs and values (the “why we do what we do”), can be compared to the branches of a tree. The beliefs and values are reflected in the mission, vision and value statements of the organization. They are what give structure to the “tree.” In some organizations there can be a disconnect between stated values and operating values – for example, an organization may state that it values employee feedback and opinions but does not act upon or even respond to the feedback it receives.

The final component of the “tree” of organizational culture is the root system. This is the level of enculturation, where what is done becomes the organization’s way of being. Members have internalized the organization’s concepts and processes so thoroughly that those concepts and processes are taken for granted. For example, employees of an organization that has a long-standing history of shared governance can no longer imagine not having a voice in decisions. Compare this with a formerly autocratic organization that is transitioning to a shared governance model. For years these employees were not allowed to make any decisions. Until the individual employees, and the group as a whole, develop trust and new assumptions, they will be slow to embrace the new culture – in fact, they may never be able to embrace the new culture.

I am often asked, “Can excellence be measured?” My answer is a resounding YES! Organizations that have earned awards and designations such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the American Nurses Credentialing Center Magnet® Designation and/or the American Association of Critical Care Nurses Beacon Award all have several outcome measures in common:

- Clinical outcomes measures (e.g. nosocomial pressure ulcers)
- Organizational outcomes measures (e.g. vacancy rates)
- Patient and family satisfaction outcomes measures
- Employee satisfaction outcomes measures

Stellar outcomes in these four areas are not dependent upon an official award or designation. Any organization that focuses on the culture needed to support improvement in these outcomes can, and will, see improvement.



While there are many elements for organizations to focus on when creating or enhancing a culture of excellence, there are several that stand out, including:

- Transformational Leadership
- Professional Practice
- Shared Governance
- Evidence-based Practice
- Use of Data to Drive Practice
- Strategic Planning
- Comprehensive Communication

You and your colleagues may be thinking, “We’re already good – We don’t need to focus on any of these cultures of excellence areas.” In response, I wish to refer you to a quote from Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*: “Good is the enemy of great.” (Collins, 2001) If your goal is to be good, you will be good, but you will never be great!

Regardless of where your organization is in creating a culture of excellence, keep in mind that cultural change takes time and depends upon many factors. Some say it takes anywhere from a year to seven years to achieve genuine cultural change. Cultural change is not a “quick fix,” nor is it the “flavor of the month.” Sustained change requires a focused application of Felgen’s model for leading lasting change: inspiration, infrastructure, education and evaluation. (Felgen, 2007). So I leave you with a question to ponder: Can any organization ever achieve a culture of excellence, or is the bar constantly being raised?

References:

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap... and others don't*. Harper Collins: New York.

Felgen, J. (2007). *I2E2: Leading Lasting Change*. Creative Health Care Management: Minneapolis, MN.

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Gen can be reached at 781.721.2268 or via email at gguanci@chcm.com