

HR and HCAHPS Education

Increasing Scores is more than just a Clinical or Management Issue

NOTE - Brian Lee has made minor edits to this document Jan 31 2013

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Many healthcare organizations look at their Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) Survey data and struggle with developing initiatives to improve their scores on different measures. Hospitals often struggle with HCAHPS scores because employees at all levels simply don't understand what the survey is and how their work directly affects results. At its core, HCAHPS is part of an organization-wide strategy to improve patient satisfaction. Since Human Resources professionals are trained to understand the organization, both from a business and employee perspective, they should be well-suited to play a central role in educating the workforce about the survey. Industry experts suggest that HR use four techniques to train employees about HCAHPS and help enhance survey scores.

1. Brief the C-Suite First

Organizational understanding about HCAHPS has to start at the top. To take the lead on this knowledge issue, HR should consider holding executive briefings about HCAHPS and employee involvement with every member of the C-suite. Brian Lee, founder and CEO of Custom Learning Systems and the Healthcare Service Excellence Conference, observed, "The C-suite in hospitals will listen to Human Resources because it's the nerve center for people who run the organization." These meetings should include the CEO, CFO, CNO, and other organizational leaders.

2. Hold Organization-Wide HCAHPS Training

Organization-wide training is essential for HCAHPS because it is a program that spans all aspects of a hospital. Susan Grady, owner of SM Grady Strategic Human Resources, noted, "Healthcare organizations are often comprised of small groups of people with different areas of expertise. Unfortunately, these teams usually aren't trained to work together. Yet, cooperation is a key to patient satisfaction."

To address this issue, hospitals need to select an HCAHPS champion. This is an individual with the skills and competencies needed to look beyond their professional group and partner with the entire organization. The champion may be the HR officer or one of the HR professionals. Brian Lee recommended four steps that HCAHPS champions can use to transform an organization:

1. Conduct a Train-the-trainer course for five percent of your brightest and best staff to teach an HCAHPS based service excellence workshops to their peers.
2. Require every employee to attend a three hour HCAHPS based service excellence workshop each year.
3. Ask each unit to hold a monthly DOIT (Daily Ongoing Improvement Tactics) meeting once a month.
4. Request that each team have a 15-minute stand up "Service Huddle" once a week, designed to keep the patient experience top of mind, where teams share information about what they have learned about patient expectations and HCAHPS from the previous week, and agree on what they will do better this week to address those issues.

3. Educate Employees and managers About Service and Communication Skills, Then Hold Them Accountable

HCAHPS performance goals should be incorporated into the employee appraisal process. However, before employees can be held accountable for these goals, they need to be educated about the competencies that support HCAHPS scores. Susan Grady said, "Employees must learn more about how patients perceive quality and how to place the patient at the center of everything they do. Interestingly, healthcare workers equate quality with positive outcomes, but patients equate quality care with a satisfying in-hospital experience." Performance management software will help track employee goals related to HCAHPS, as well as employee feedback throughout the year.

Hospitals should expect all employees to embrace a patient-centric culture. However, leaders must recognize that most staff members are not knowledgeable about patient satisfaction or patient communication skills because they don't learn these competencies at home, in school, or in the workplace. HCAHPS education needs to include both managers and employees, and only then can both managers and employees can be held accountable for HCAHPS goals.

4. Target Physicians for Service Excellence Training

Patient satisfaction and HCAHPS is not just a nursing issue. One of the key HCAHPS summary measures relates to communication with doctors. As HR trains doctors on HCAHPS and service excellence, they should consider techniques that are tailored for this specific employee group. Four recommended approaches from Brian Lee include:

- Schedule a free dinner or lunch with an outside expert who will have credibility with physicians.

- Keep the training brief – ideally an hour or less, and insure Physicians receive CMEs for the event.
- Explain HCAHPS and what’s in it for the physician. Consider sending a report to the physicians’ homes which compares their doctor HCAHPS communication scores with those of their peers.
- Challenge physicians to set an annual goal for HCAHPS scores related to doctor communication.

Educating employees about patient satisfaction and HCAHPS is an initiative that spans the entire healthcare organization. Every staff member should understand how this survey affects the hospital and how their work has a direct impact on HCAHPS results. Human Resources should take the lead, informing employees about patient satisfaction and working with management teams to hold staff members accountable for engaging in the appropriate service excellence behaviors. Hospitals that take these steps are more likely to see an increase in their HCAHPS scores.