

# Strategies to Enhance Physician Engagement

Alan H. Rosenstein, MD, MBA\*

Healthcare reform and other externally driven healthcare initiatives have introduced a number of new healthcare requirements that are restructuring the way we provide healthcare services. With a growing focus on health plan efficiency and accountability for value-based performance metrics extending across the full spectrum of care, healthcare organizations are looking to develop new models of care to meet the needs of today's healthcare environment. Physician alignment and engagement are keys to success. But many physicians feel threatened, overwhelmed, and frustrated with the changes, and it's beginning to take its toll on physician attitudes and perspectives about care. Enhancing physician engagement requires a multistep process that includes making an effort to better understand their world; encouraging opportunities for input and participation in care redesign; providing education, training, guidance, and support; and making the effort to recognize and thank them for what they do.

**KEY WORDS:** Physician engagement; physician behaviors; physician satisfaction; organizational culture.

Today's complex healthcare environment is having a significant impact on the way we deliver care. Healthcare reform and other payer initiatives are moving away from traditional fee-for-service reimbursements by focusing more on appropriateness, effectiveness, and efficiency in care management outcomes, holding providers more accountable for services rendered by restructuring payments based on "value-based" performance metrics across the full spectrum of care. Mergers, acquisitions, consolidations, and the evolution of new Accountable Care Organizations have added more fuel to the fire. In an effort to compete in this environment, healthcare providers are reevaluating their current delivery models and looking at ways to redesign care delivery systems to more effectively integrate and align roles and responsibilities to meet these needs. In order to be successful, it is crucial to engage physicians. In order to engage physicians, we need to gain a better understanding of their individual needs and priorities, educate them on evolving legislative and business issues that may affect their practice, motivate them to get engaged and take a more active role in care management transitions, and, when necessary, provide appropriate support services to help them better adjust to the

stress and pressures of the current healthcare environment. Easy to say—but often difficult to do.

## THE PHYSICIAN WORLD

Physicians just want to practice medicine. Many physicians are getting increasingly frustrated and aggravated by their perception that people are looking over their shoulder and telling them what they can do and need to do in the interests of value-based care. This sense of loss of autonomy and loss of control can be a significant impediment to physician engagement. Strategies for engagement may vary in accordance with years in practice, specialty, and current models of practice (e.g., solo, group, foundation, salaried, boutique, locum). Change is on the way. In the new medical landscape there will be a growing need for a more integrated multidisciplinary approach to full-spectrum care, with physicians playing a pivotal role in the process. As a result, many physicians are becoming disenchanted with medical practice and are in the process of reevaluating their careers. We need to look at physicians as a precious resource and do what we can to better understand their concerns and help reenergize their passion for care. So what would be the best way to proceed?

\*Practicing Internist in San Francisco, California, and consultant and educator in healthcare management; e-mail: ahrosensteinmd@aol.com.  
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**Table 1.** Strategies for Engagement

Recruitment
Onboarding
Organizational culture (R2 Trustee/ MAYO) Board/administration Work environment
Physician input Town hall meetings Department meetings One-on-one discussions
Physician education
Physician training
Care redesign
Physician support services Clinical Logistical Behavioral
Intervention Behavioral compliance
Motivation Physician satisfaction Recognize and reward

## RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Table 1 outlines a series of 10 steps that organizations should consider as they go through the process of trying to enhance physician engagement.

The process should actually start during medical school and residency, where, in addition to teaching knowledge and technical competency skills, physicians should also be taught business and personal development skills to help them better understand and react to the complexities and challenges of medical practice. Fortunately, some of the more progressive medical schools are beginning to introduce these types of programs into their curriculum. For physicians who have completed their training and are looking for new positions, one of the key issues to consider is whether or not there is a “cultural fit” between the physician and the organization as to goals and expectations of job performance. With the growing importance of team collaboration as a way to improve care efficiency, many organizations are beginning to introduce the concept of cultural fitness as a way to assess whether or not the physician would be an asset to their program.

***One of the key underpinnings of physician engagement is organizational culture.***

Once the physician comes on board, it would be advantageous to provide a comprehensive onboarding process where the physician is welcomed, is made aware of

organizational priorities and logistics, and learns about the different programs and services that are available to help support his or her role in care delivery.

One of the key underpinnings of physician engagement is organizational culture. Several recent studies have shown the importance of leadership understanding and support and the dynamics of the work environment as key components in enhancing physician relationships and engagement.<sup>1-3</sup>

Another vital step is to encourage physician input. One of the major concerns of physicians is the unilateral conversation of telling them how they need to perform or what they need to do without giving them an explanation as to why and not asking for their input into the process. Giving the physician an opportunity to better understand the need for change, listening and responding to his or her priorities and concerns, and soliciting physician input and involvement into the process will lower resistance to change and enhance the potential for engagement. These meetings can be conducted in a town hall format, at department meetings, through special task forces or committees, or through one-on-one conversations.

Making an effort to keep physicians informed about pertinent changes in the healthcare environment and how they might impact practice patterns through appropriate education programs and newsletter alerts will help physicians gain a better understanding of what’s happening around them and promote acceptance and endorsement of the changes needed to support patient centric care.

***Recent studies have reported that high levels of stress and burnout affect more than 50% of practicing physicians.***

Given the growing complexity of care delivery and the need for a well-coordinated, multidisciplinary team approach to care management, providing training courses designed to improve physician communication and team collaboration skills will help physicians take on a more effective role in engaging and directing care. Depending on individual circumstances, courses in diversity management, cultural competency, emotional intelligence, or conflict management can provide tools to help physicians improve work relationships and enhance their willingness and abilities to engage with patient care activities. When making recommendations regarding standardizing care through the implementation of best practice guidelines, protocols, scripted orders, or computer based algorithms, giving physicians the rationale for change and having them feel like they are part of the process will increase their acceptance of and adoption rates of desired changes.

After gaining a better understanding of physician wants and needs, the next step is to provide appropriate support services to help them better adjust to the pressures and demands of today's practice environment. From a clinical perspective, physician concerns around time, capacity, and productivity can lead to increasing physician frustration and dissatisfaction. Remedies would include lightening productivity or scheduling requirements, and, when feasible, providing support through the use of physician assistants and nurse practitioners to help ease patient load. From a logistical perspective, any services that can help physicians more effectively deal with nonclinical responsibilities will help improve overall engagement. Service support through case managers, discharge planners, care coordinators, documentation specialists, and the like can help improve physician documentation requirements and better coordinate follow up care. One of the key areas of concern is the conversion to electronic medical records. Beyond training and IT support, many organizations are now providing "scribes" to help ease the burden of electronic documentation. From a behavioral perspective, a growing body of literature documents the increasing effects of stress and burnout, which can adversely affect physician attitudes and perceptions about medical care.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies have reported that high levels of stress and burnout affect more than 50% of practicing physicians.<sup>5,6</sup> Stress and burnout can cause both physical and psychological disturbances, which can affect attitudes and behaviors that impact work relationships and need to be considered as a major factor affecting physician engagement. Stress and burnout in physicians often is difficult to address. Physicians often won't admit that they're working under stress, and, if they do, feel that they have been working under stress their entire career and can handle it themselves. Even if they recognize that they may need some outside help, they are reluctant to follow through, because of stoicism and a perceived threat to competency, concerns about confidentiality, or lack of time and commitment. We

**AQ1** need the organizations to take a proactive role in trying to help their physicians and not wait for the physician to take action on their own.

Many approaches are available for the organization to take. Training workshops on stress management and people management can be offered in an effort to provide tools to help the physician handle day-to-day pressures in a more effective manner. At the next level, offering individualized coaching or counseling services can provide a more customized approach to addressing specific problems. The

**AQ2** focus is on what we can do to help you succeed in practice. At a more global level, the focus can be on improving overall physician well-being and work-life balance. Many organizations are reinvigorating their physician wellness committees or designing specific wellness programs that focus on the importance of lifestyle management and

wellness activities to support a healthy and happy physician workforce.<sup>7</sup>

What do you do when the physician is resistant and continues to exhibit behaviors that impede collaborative care? In a previous issue in this journal,<sup>8</sup> I discussed strategies for developing a win-win approach for addressing disruptive behaviors in the organizational setting. Many of the strategies suggested for improving engagement also are relevant to addressing disruptive behaviors. Listen to the physician, recognize and be responsive to their needs, and provide needed support. In the end, physicians need to be held accountable for their actions, and, if they are not willing to follow the recommendations, appropriate action must be taken.

### *Physicians pride themselves on the way they provide care.*

The final recommendation is motivation. One the key issues is "What's in it for me?" Physicians pride themselves on the way they provide care. Helping to alleviate some of their frustrations, providing services that will make their lives easier, and improving efficiencies in care management processes will help redirect their energies to actual patient care. Less frustration and improved efficiency will enhance their satisfaction, improve care relationships, improve outcomes, and increase the likelihood of positive physician engagement. Always remember to recognize and thank them for what they do. We all get so consumed and involved in day-to-day activities that we just take everybody's hard work for granted. At the end of the day, expressions of appreciation will go a long way.

## CONCLUSION

Physicians just want to practice good medical care. It's just that everything else seems to get in the way. All physicians pride themselves on their judgment, decision-making skills, clinical or technical skills, and their ability to provide high-quality care. When outside forces begin to second-guess their intentions and suggest more effective ways and means to deliver care, there is often a backlash of resistance that dampens physicians' spirit and their zest for providing care. To enhance physician engagement, we must first address the issues that are affecting physician attitudes and behaviors and provide appropriate support and career guidance to help them better adjust to the pressures of medical practice. Attitudes will vary, depending on the physicians' years in practice and realized goals and expectations. Improving physicians' attitudes will increase their overall satisfaction with work experiences and provide the stepping stone to physician engagement. Asking for physician input and involvement, where they are able to voice their opinions into care redesign, will help solidify their

involvement. Being appreciative and respectful of their time and effort, dedication, and commitment, and making time to recognize and thank them for what they do will go a long way in enhancing engagement and develop strong work relationships that will improve patient outcomes. ■■

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## Author Queries

AQ1: Which organizations?

AQ2: Who is “we”?

AQ3: Please explain “(R2 Trustee/ MAYO)”