



Today's Topic:

From Great to Best: Culture as a Competitive Advantage in Healthcare

Guest Speakers:

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Facilitator:

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Northwest Community Hospital, in its journey from a great to a best workplace, has succeeded in nurturing a strong culture that has become its greatest competitive advantage. A strong company culture can significantly affect an employee's experience in the workplace, and is not often linked to an organization's competitive strategy. The initiative to build the hospital's culture grew out of this vision from the CEO, Bruce Crowther: "I believe culture solidly trumps strategy. Our employees and our desirability as an employer are the foundations of every success that we achieve." On June 21, 2006, Mark Lusson, Ann Erickson, and Barbara Walsh joined Jane Weiss and a group of peers to discuss their organization's culture and how it has become an integral part of a strong business strategy. This healthcare provider located in Arlington Heights, Illinois, has been recognized within its industry as one of the top 10% among physicians as a great place to practice and Top Heart Program in Illinois. In addition to being recognized as one of the Top 25 Employers in the Chicago Metropolitan area, Northwest Community Hospital was named to Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For*® list in 2006.

Culture as a Vision and Objective

Northwest Community Hospital began this initiative eight years ago with the CEO's idea that "the strategic plan is no good unless we have a culture," as paraphrased by Mark Lusson. This belief was communicated to the employees directly from the CEO through various methods, including letters and Town Hall Meetings. The catchphrase, "culture trumps strategy", was the basis of this initiative that resulted in this vision for the organization:

"To be recognized as a leader, creating a 21st century hospital, through the innovative use of our caring culture, clinical expertise, and technology. This will make it possible for patients, physicians, employees, and the community to experience excellence."

Mark emphasized that "caring culture" was intentionally listed as the number one priority in this vision, noting that "culture was the key to our success." In measuring the organization's success, he advised, "Don't measure everything, just measure the things that are important to you." The Northwest Community Hospital leadership team focused on quality, patient satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and financial health; all employees were reviewed on these aspects so that the team could fully understand the progress they were making.

Employees are the Center

When the leadership team at Northwest Community Hospital was forming their strategic plan, they realized that in order “for physicians to be happy, our community to be happy, our patients to get excellent care, the employees need to be at the center of everything we do,” as stated by Mark. In a patient-care facility, it became clear to the team that, while patients came first in their business and everyday operation, employees were at the center of their organization. The patient-first attitude was not feasible without the underlying foundation of an employee-centric mentality that was demonstrated by several means described by Barbara Walsh in an effort to “meet employees’ needs for communication, involvement, and to build trust in leadership.”

- Communication at the hospital is varied and frequent. In this initiative, the leadership team **increased the vehicles for communication** to encompass the typical magazines and newsletters, as well as Town Hall meetings with a pep rally feeling, complete with prizes and drawings, and personal letters to employees’ homes. When educating the staff about a new option in the benefits and pension plan, Mark delivered a total of 43 presentations to employees in various venues – including the auditorium, classrooms, and department meetings – in an effort to clearly convey this important change in the workplace.
- Northwest Community Hospital is purposefully **active in involving employees in decision-making that affects their work environment**, including fifteen years of shared governance in the nursing department. For example, when the hospital was planning a new addition to the building, a two-day forum was held so that a sample of patients and staff could hear from an expert in excellent patient care and an architect dedicated to building safe hospitals. Employees were intentionally targeted for this forum – rather than managers and directors – because the discussions in this forum were focused on those who would actually use and experience the new building.
- There are various **employee teams** that staff members can join to have a voice in affecting their workplace. Employee View Teams consist of volunteers who examine the benefits and wellness initiatives in addition to the overall employee experience on an annual basis. For ten years, employees on Cool Teams have worked together to coordinate cool activities for the organization like outings or a chili cook-off.
- Employees are **recognized for achievements** like tenure – from five to forty years – and participation on employee teams. Ann Erickson believes that the tenure recognition helps the organization “turn to senior employees to rally the newer employees around their stories behind why they’ve stayed so long.” In addition, Employee of Month and Year awards are presented to nominees who are recommended by their peers for achievement, whether in an internal or external capacity.

Developing Leaders

At the start of this initiative, Northwest Community Hospital’s leadership team realized, as Mark shared, “We’re not about management, we’re about leadership.” In order to send this message throughout the hospital, all of the titles in the organization that were formerly managers, directors, and vice presidents were changed to team facilitators; this change was visible to the entire staff through reissuing of identification badges to reflect the new structure. Although some former managers and directors ridiculed the change and others even left the organization, Mark believes that this aggressive action “sent a clear message to people that we were serious, and it sent a clear message to our management staff that we don’t want you to manage people, we want you to lead people.” Since this structural change, manager titles have returned to the organization, but the message still remains that leadership is the priority, rather than management.

In order to develop leaders within the organization, the hospital's CEO motivated the formation and development of a Learning Institute. Barbara explained, "The focus first was on the management team. To have a great culture, you need managers who understand that employees are at the center of everything we do." The Learning Institute has since broadened to include training opportunities for all employees, such as the patient care forum mentioned above. The CEO has also established a President's Circle, whereby all operations team members can apply to shadow him for a year, which includes attending a new hire training session for a week. The two selected directors learn first-hand about Bruce's role as the President and CEO and his commitment to employee satisfaction. These learning opportunities help equip team leaders to promote the employee-centric culture at Northwest Community Hospital.

Leaders have made efforts to become more accessible to employees by means of eliminating an executive section of the parking area and cafeteria, participating in department meetings, and making regular rounds throughout the hospital. With increased visibility and more frequent communication methods, leadership has succeeded in engaging their teams and creating more trusting relationships. Mark notes a significant change since the initiative was launched: employees are more trusting of changes within the organization; while they might challenge decisions initially, they have learned to try and understand the change rather than simply speaking amongst themselves.

Conclusion

In Northwest Community Hospital's journey from a great hospital to one of the best workplaces in the country, various methods were implemented, all founded on one belief: "culture trumps strategy." The strong culture that has been nurtured at the hospital consists of three major points: 1) Employees are at the center of everything in the hospital; 2) Patients are the first priority; 3) People in the organization need to be led, not managed.

The leadership team's efforts around communication, employee involvement in decision-making, recognition, and development of leadership have resulted in a pervasive mentality throughout the hospital that has built pride and camaraderie among the staff, while the organization has experienced recognition as a great workplace and financial success. Mark credits the research from Great Place to Work[®] Institute, Inc. for informing leadership's mindset around employee satisfaction, particularly the statement in the Trust Index[®] survey that reads, "*Management shows a sincere interest in me as a person, not just an employee.*" As Mark describes, "If you work for an organization that appreciates you as a person and an employee, and the person that you deal with, your peers, and your boss also appreciate you as a person and employee, you're going to be pretty happy. And I think that's the number one thing." With a strong influence and belief from the CEO and a commitment from the leadership team to build a strong and lasting culture, Northwest Community Hospital has made the transition from a successful healthcare provider to a truly great workplace.



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