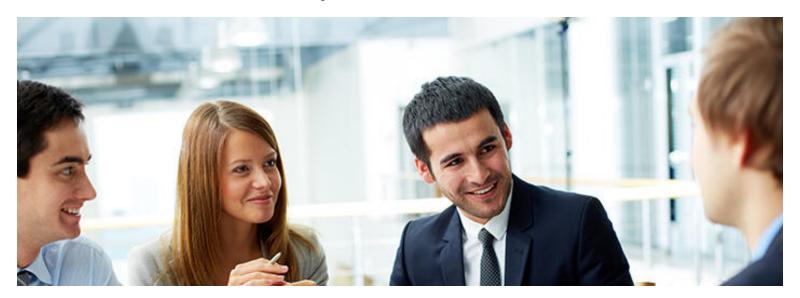# Four Vital Health Care Leadership Lessons

It's a challenge to stay healthy while working in health care, especially given the typical demands of most health care roles. Long hours, stress, limited access to healthy foods and sedentary jobs all conspire to rob health care employees of optimal opportunities to take better care of themselves. Clinicians face an additional level of personal health challenges as they care for those who are ill and injured.

That's why it's so vital for those who work in health care to proactively take care of themselves – first – before they can effectively work with or take care of others. It's also why the "employee first" messaging of Sherry Stewart Deutschmann proved so powerful to those who attended her keynote address at a gathering of the Northern California chapter of the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA).

In Deutschmann's presentation, "The Power of NO," she detailed the constant challenge among health care employees to routinely say "yes" to all work requests, leaving them potentially resentful, depleted, less effective and unhappy. Instead, according to Deutschmann, by judiciously saying "no," health care employees can more likely help themselves and ultimately more effectively serve others.

Key Leadership Lessons in Health Care

Inspired by the HFMA event presentation, here are four key leadership lessons in health care from Freed Associates:

1. **Emphasize that employees (not consumers/patients) come first** – In a mission-driven industry such as health

care, it can be easy to continuously put the needs of others first ahead of your own well-being or the welfare of your colleagues. But doing so is short-sighted, as it can detrimentally affect your health and the quality of care or service you provide. The presentation emphasized that creating a habit of treating yourself and employees needs first will lead to doing what's right for consumers and patients.

It's essentially the same employee-first counsel as contained in the best-selling 2013 book "Patients Come Second" by Paul Spiegelman and Britt Barrett, who wrote: "In order to care for and retain patients, leaders must first create exceptional teams and find ways to engage nurses, administrative staff, physicians, supervisors, and even housekeeping staff and switchboard operators."

Ideas for action: Start by sincerely asking employees about their wants and needs in the workplace. Often, employees simply want minor changes. When you hire new employees, focus on the cultural fit and a favorable attitude in addition to aptitude. For current employees, recognize and reinforce positive behaviors and actions. To the extent possible, provide employees, especially those on the front lines, with opportunities to meet customer/patient needs themselves, through their own thinking and initiative, rather than imposing volumes of top-down rules.

2. **Put people first, not "person first"** – When working as a part of a team, how often have you had one or more team members harm the team's overall performance, due to poor work, inappropriate behavior, or some other negative reason? Many organizations allow the unsatisfactory behaviors of employees to fester and grow, negatively affecting the performance of the entire team – or organization.

Health care employees have the highest levels of stress and workplace complaints of any industry, according to a recent CareerBuilder survey. Don't compound potentially high levels of tension in your workplace by refusing to address performance issues of employees or teams.

Ideas for action: Nervous about addressing employees exhibiting sub-optimal performance or behaviors? You're not alone. A recent survey reveals that a majority of leaders (69 percent) said they were uncomfortable communicating with their staff, and more than a third (37 percent) were uncomfortable giving direct feedback to employees who they believed would respond negatively. When discussing job performance with an employee, do so privately. Be direct, use facts, don't blame or use hearsay and be kind. Ask questions to understand the person and their motivation. Give specific examples of desired performance or behaviors to illustrate what you wish to instill.

3. **Enable your employees to put their colleagues and/or partners first** – Is the work you and your team provide of sufficiently high caliber and quality that it routinely assists and does not impede your colleagues and/or partners? If not, strive to consistently deliver that degree of service excellence, and allow your colleagues/partners to do *their work* more effectively, based on the quality and timeliness of *your work*.

By understanding the needs of your colleagues/partners and delivering high-quality work, you provide them with the time and opportunity to pursue other matters, and not force them to make amends because of you. It could be as simple as asking: "How can I help you do your work more effectively?" or "What do you do with the work output I give to you?"

Ideas for action: Seek to truly understand the needs of your colleagues and/or partners, and not be so caught up in your own thoughts or activities that you're oblivious to the interests of others. When you ask a colleague or partner "What do you do with the work I give you?" you provide the recipients of this question the opportunity to tell you about *their* work preferences. Often, those who pose some form of this question are surprised to learn that they may be doing something that is not needed or wanted. Or, the questioner discovers ways of improving the work delivered.

4. **Commit to providing a joyful, fulfilling and problem-solving work culture** – Staff turnover is a huge problem in health care, as clinicians and employees depart for more attractive employers/opportunities, or exit the industry altogether. A third of recruiters in health care rank employee turnover as their top recruiting concern, according to a recent study by Health eCareers. What are you doing in your workplace to provide your employees with the resources and support they need to perform at their best – and stay with your organization?

Ideas for action: As with employees in any industry, health care employees want to know where they stand, relative to their employers' expectations, and how they can advance in their respective roles. Recognize and reward these fundamental employee interests by regularly providing your employees with regular feedback (not waiting for a once-a-year formal meeting) and mutually charting development paths with your employees. Make sure you have sufficient staffing in high-demand areas of your organization or you will dishearten and/or burn out those who work there. Proactively work to build a sense of community and culture among your employees. Seek to match your employees with suitable mentors or role models for alternate voices of support and encouragement.

Conclusion

Those who work in health care often spend so much time and energy looking out for the interest of others that it's difficult for them to look out for their own welfare, personally and professionally. Health care employers and leaders who make a point of putting their employees first, and ensuring that these people have the support and resources they need to perform their work effectively, will likely see tremendous benefits. Patients will receive superior care, and the system will work better for everyone.

Others notice the difference in health care organizations that truly take care of their employees. As Deutschmann concluded: "If you value your employees, your employees will create value for your customers and patients."