

How to create a vibrant culture in your private practice

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No private practice can effortlessly create a positive and forward-looking culture. It takes strategic leadership and insightful strategies to develop a cohesive and efficient team and guide them through change.

Physician practice owners wear multiple hats—as clinical and management leaders, and as chief strategists—to ensure that the needs of patients and team members are met by increasing practice efficiencies, improving patient care and enhancing professional satisfaction. Physician burnout adds urgency to making the right choices for your practice, as the causes and remedies of physician burnout are strongly linked to workplace factors.

The AMA offers the resources and support physicians need to start and sustain success on the path to private practice.

Guidance physicians need can be found, for example, among the resources collected in the AMA's STEPS Forward™, an open-access platform featuring more than 50 modules that offer actionable, expert-driven strategies and insights supported by practical resources and tools.

Many of the modules address specific activities that will flow from a practice culture that is ready, motivated and equipped for change. However, there are four foundational modules for physician leaders who are starting their own practice or who haven't yet focused on organizational culture.

Decide where you want to go

The STEPS Forward module, “Preparing Your Practice for Change,” addresses how to use an organizational approach, with plenty of input from your entire team, to create an optimized practice environment. Here are some of the key steps.

Define a vision for your practice. How do you want the practice to be seen? What do you want it to be known for? How does the practice see itself? Defining your vision includes developing objectives in patient care, creating an optimized workflow, and determining how to create a positive, team-based culture that will thrive in today's health care environment.

Communicate that vision and create a practical pathway to achieve it. Everyone at the practice should be aware of what changes are planned and happening. A dedicated change team, typically with three or four committed members, can manage and monitor the process.

Keep the project on track by documenting what types of resources are needed to achieve the day-to-day tasks and overall project milestones. During the initial phases of change, it is important to clearly delineate which team member “owns” each task and when each is to be completed.

A companion module, “Select Sustainable Change Initiatives,” provides a simple and effective way to prioritize and select what changes to pursue. The first step is to determine whether it will ease the work burden for those who deliver care. The next two steps focus on two fundamental aspects of your practice: whether the intervention will improve patient care and whether there is a revenue stream to support the change.

Achieve your goals as a team

A critical factor in whether your vision will be achieved rests with the practice's culture. The module “Team Culture: Strengthen Team Cohesion and Engagement” defines organizational culture as “a set of underlying rules and beliefs that determine how your team interacts with patients and each other.” A healthy, engaged and positive team culture is essential even when change is not in the plans. Here are some key steps to developing strong team culture.

Diagnose the culture and brainstorm improvements. An anonymous survey can uncover areas that need more attention. Communication is often identified as an area that needs improvement. If you haven't already, consider implementing daily team huddles and regular team meetings to ensure that everyone in the practice is on the same page.

Meet with team members and encourage them to offer solutions, have an open conversation about which are the most practical to implement, and have the team select one or two interventions. Keep the lines of communication open with regularly scheduled meetings.

Develop a team compact. This document is developed collaboratively by the entire practice and sets the ground rules on how team members should treat one another. The module provides customizable sample templates that include sections on creating an enjoyable work environment, being respectful

and a team player, communicating to facilitate team culture, and continuous learning.

Have positive interactions with team members. Your team’s engagement with the practice depends in large part on your engagement with them as the physician leader. Getting to know about your team and what matters most to them sets a positive tone for the culture in your practice.

Using principles described in the module “Appreciative Inquiry: Fostering Positive Culture” will help you use methods that focus on individual and team strengths in order to achieve team cohesion and reach your goals. Simple tactics—such as asking, “What went well for you today?”—can change the team’s mindset to focus on what is functioning smoothly, rather than fixating on what went wrong.

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