On a hot summer day almost 20 years ago, Suja Mathew, MD, arrived at Cook County Hospital in Chicago as a bright-eyed junior attending. A few years later, she led the residency program and then was named chair of medicine at Cook County Health. One year into her new position, there was a shift in her satisfaction. The culture of well-being needed to improve.

“When I returned home one evening, my youngest son said to me, ‘Mom, you used to be really happy at work.’ And he was right,” Dr. Mathew said at the AMA Practice Transformation Boot Camp 2019 in Charlotte. The boot camp took place ahead of the 2019 American Conference on Physician Health, co-sponsored by the AMA, Mayo Clinic and Stanford Medicine.

After Dr. Mathew transitioned into the role of chair, she began to feel alone.

“It was incredibly hard not feeling that support and, frankly, bringing that back home to my family as well in ways that I never really knew until it was called out to me,” she said, adding that she was on the edge of not enjoying her work.

To overcome her burnout and dissatisfaction, she needed to change the culture of well-being at Cook County Hospital. Here are the seven keys.

**Be a champion**

It is important to recognize yourself as a champion or identify a colleague that is one. Dr. Mathew is a champion because she believes in the work she is doing. As champions, physicians can help improve the culture of their organizations, she said.

“We are all champions in this work and it's important to recognize this work,” she said.
Find a leader

“I needed to find my leader who was going to be an advocate for the issues that were of such importance to me,” said Dr. Mathew.

She turned to her chief medical officer and explained her frustrations. While she found her leader, she also needed to be a leader herself. Together they could identify the problem and find solutions to create change.

Harvest your data

Dr. Mathew advised looking at the experiences, stories, reports and complaints to better understand where you are as an organization. One way to do this is through satisfaction surveys distributed to the entire workforce.

“I needed to understand not only what was going on in my organization but across the nation too,” said Dr. Mathew. “The only way that we can put our patients first is to make sure that we do what we were called to do and stay in this constant vision of going above and beyond.”

Share your story

Dr. Mathew openly talks about her personal connection to Cook County Hospital to show why she needed to share the stories of her colleagues with their permission.

“I needed to make sure that everyone was listening to our story. This was about our mission and our patients, and that it absolutely necessitated the wellness of the care provider,” she added.

Form your coalition

To ignite change, it is important to create a team of leaders, or a coalition. Every other week, Dr. Mathew meets with her team for an hour to discuss what is going on in their department.

“What I wanted people to do as a first step for us achieving this vision was to assess where we are now,” said Dr. Mathew. “Let’s ask our people now if they’re happy and if they’re not satisfied, why not?”

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/7-tips-create-culture-well-being-your-organization
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Communicate failures

To ensure a program’s success, Dr. Mathew recommended sharing failures. This allows teams to work together to create a better solution.

“We think we’re affecting change, but then it absolutely doesn’t work,” she said. “We need to be honest about those feelings as well.”

Celebrate your victories

It is also important to celebrate even the smallest victories with your teams, Dr. Mathew said. For example, the cardiology department sends daily emails that announce exciting news from each member. From celebrating the publication of a paper to reporting improvements in engagement scores, it is important to highlight good news.

The AMA's STEPS Forward™ open-access modules offer innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. These courses can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine and improve practice efficiency. One CME module specifically addresses how to create a strong team culture.

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