Here’s how to cultivate leaders who promote physician well-being

AUG 17, 2021

Tanya Albert Henry
Contributing News Writer

If you want your physicians to have a greater sense of professional satisfaction and a lower rate of burnout, studies show that leadership matters. That’s because a physician’s direct leader sets the foundation of the organizational culture, which is a powerful driver of well-being for health care professionals.

The leader also directly supports and nurtures their team members’ well-being. In fact, the leader’s personal well-being habits—from the things they do to prevent burnout to self-care practices—are associated with their leadership effectiveness.

An AMA STEPS Forward™ toolkit “Leadership Measure and Assess Leader Behaviors to Improve Professional Well-Being” helps you cultivate this level of leadership within your organization. In addition to explaining the significance and impact leadership has in promoting well-being, it teaches you to measure and improve leader behaviors so that you can improve team satisfaction and reduce burnout. This, in turn, will help patients.

The toolkit walks through five steps you can take to cultivate leadership in your organization that can boost physician and other health professionals’ sense of job satisfaction and well-being.

Measure core leadership behaviors

Physicians and team members should be asked to assess their immediate leader’s behaviors annually. The questions should focus on leader actions and interactions with the team members—not whether the leader is “liked.” For example, ask if a team member strongly agrees or disagrees on a scale of one to five whether “The leader to whom I report holds career development conversations with me?” or “Treats me with respect and dignity?” or “Provides helpful feedback and coaching on my performance?”


Copyright 1995 - 2021 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
Each question should be used in the context of a comprehensive assessment and development program for leaders. That would include, for example, work unit safety, patient experience, senior leadership feedback and more.

**Assess and share results**

Determine the aggregate leader behavior score for each leader and share the results with the leaders in a psychologically safe way. For example, it is ideal for work unit leaders to confidentially receive their results from a senior leader with whom they have an ongoing relationship.

**Provide growth and development opportunities**

The assessment’s purpose is to help people become better leaders. Consequently, the organization needs to give leaders opportunities to improve. Some ways to provide professional development include:

- Executive coaching.
- Peer-leader support discussion groups.
- Leader behavior workshops targeting behaviors specific to attaining professional fulfillment.
- Mentorship opportunities from leaders within the organization.

**Standardize, scale across organization**

Organizations can start by assessing leaders in one subset of the organization. For example, only executives or physician leaders. As these leaders make improvements and grow, organizations can scale to leaders across the system at all levels of leadership.

Standardizing how leaders are measured across the organization can help executive leaders make a more balanced and accurate assessment of leadership capabilities and provide insight into what professional development would be most helpful to each leader.

**Build a culture of trust**
Trust between physicians and the leader they report to is what creates the best relationships. This can be fostered by ongoing weekly, monthly or quarterly dialogue that includes appreciation, feedback and support.

Also, there should be an annual performance review, which is a good opportunity to nurture a partnership. The toolkit offers suggestions on how to organize annual review conversations around five actions:

- **Include.** Make sure the team member feels comfortable with your words, body language and actions.
- **Inform.** Communicate everything transparently.
- **Inquire.** Ask what brings the team member joy.
- **Develop.** Ask about annual career goals and make a plan to accomplish them together.
- **Recognize.** Express gratitude for the team member’s specific accomplishments or actions.

**Learn more with the AMA**

The AMA STEPS Forward open-access toolkits 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.

STEPS Forward is part of the AMA Ed Hub™, an online platform that brings together all the high-quality CME, maintenance of certification, and educational content you need—in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.

Learn more about AMA CME accreditation.