Building bridges is key to a chief wellness officer’s success

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Tanya Albert Henry
Contributing News Writer

Amid a culture that is contributing to burnout and a loss of a sense of joy in medicine, a chief wellness officer (CWO) can help an organization systematically improve the well-being of physicians and other health professionals.

After a CWO has assembled a team, defined a mission and developed a strategy to achieve it, it is important to establish partnerships with other leaders across the entire organization. An AMA STEPS Forward® toolkit helps guide CWOs on how to do just that and more.

“Establish Partnerships, Distributed Leadership and Thematic Task Forces” is the sixth step of the “Chief Wellness Officer Road Map” toolkit that outlines a nine-step approach that CWOs can follow to implement a leadership strategy for professional well-being.

The toolkit advises that an effective CWO needs to develop relationships with enterprise-level colleagues, including the chief medical officer, chief clinical officer, chief experience officer, chief human resources officer, chief medical information officer and chief operating officer. In an academic setting, it’s important to also work closely with the deans of undergraduate and graduate medical education, the dean of faculty development and the ombudsman.

Additionally, an effective CWO regularly interacts with department chairs and hospital executives and builds a network of local well-being leaders in each department.

“An effective CWO will be at the executive leadership table when major organizational decisions are made and be able to raise the question: How will this decision impact the well-being of the workforce?” said Christine A. Sinsky, MD, vice president of professional satisfaction at the AMA, who co-wrote the toolkit. “Having established good working relationships with the other leaders will go a long way toward facilitating these conversations.”

It is also helpful to plan to meet individually with key stakeholders before a particularly challenging issue is raised at the executive leadership level, Dr. Sinsky said. “People often respond more
favorably when they are not caught off-guard by an issue that may overlap with their areas of responsibility."

When it’s time for a task forces

Having relationships with many people across the organization will be helpful for a CWO when it comes time to commission a thematic, time-limited task force aimed at helping the organization make progress on a specific issue that spans a number of the organization’s silos or departments.

The CWO and their team’s role in these task forces is usually to help craft the mission, charge and timeline before appointing other institutional leaders to head up the task force. Some things to keep in mind when creating these task forces:

- Task forces can focus on things such as physicians’ needs at different stages of their careers or physician parents’ needs, such as breast-feeding mothers and more.
- While others will lead these task forces, the CWO shouldn’t underestimate the logistical support and time demands these task forces require.
- Generally, a CWO shouldn’t oversee or commission more than one task force annually.

The CWO also must “take great care when considering which topics are appropriate for a task force they will commission, and which are not.” For example, do not commission task forces on topics that are squarely in other executives’ leadership purviews unless they are coordinated and commissioned together. Task forces focused on teamwork, benefits or specific HR policies, EHR-related factors and staffing issues likely fall into that category.

Additionally, the CEO or dean—not the CWO—should be the one to launch broad task force topics, including specific dimensions of organizational culture. The CWO’s role may be to chair, rather than commission, the task force. Task force topics aimed at efficiency of practice are best addressed at the work-unit level and not an enterprise-level task force.

Learn more about how to lay the groundwork at your organization with the “Establishing a Chief Wellness Officer Position” toolkit or by watching the webinar.

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.


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