Building a Team-based Culture

While quality is a team sport and Board Certification is an individual pursuit, the two can align in a team-based culture, according to speakers at a session entitled Team-based Culture and Improvement in Continuing Certification at the 2016 Organizational QI Forum.

Hosted by the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), in conjunction with the ABMS Multi-Specialty Portfolio Program™ (Portfolio Program), the third annual QI Forum bridged public policy, organizational and professional imperatives driving quality improvement (QI), and the ABMS Program for Maintenance of Certification (ABMS MOC®). Health care leaders, QI experts, policy makers, leading researchers, and journal editors described quality initiatives and best practices, including examples from Portfolio Program sponsors, as well as explored research, evaluation, and dissemination opportunities.

Steps for Creating an Effective Team

Grant Greenberg, MD, MA, MHSA, who was the Medical Director for Clinical Alignment and Performance Excellence at the University of Michigan Medical Group when he spoke and is now Chair of the Department of Family Medicine at Lehigh Valley Physician Group, and Eric Peterson, EdM, FACEHP, CHCP, Senior Director for Education and Quality at the American Academy of Physician Assistants, provided suggestions on creating an effective team to engage in QI.

The first step is strategically choosing people to serve on the team, said Dr. Greenberg, who also directed the Portfolio Program at the University of Michigan Medical Group. He likes to include people who are very adverse to change. “If I can convince my biggest naysayers to engage in the process, they suddenly become the spokespersons for the change,” he said. “When everyone sees those people getting involved, they think maybe they should listen, too.” While it’s good to include key staff, physicians, and nurses as well as individuals from scheduling and information technology, don’t be “overly inclusive” by allowing individuals who are there solely to obtain credit without engaging in the process. Sometimes it can be helpful to ask who is missing on the team. Having someone other than the team leader serve as facilitator can be beneficial because the two roles require different skill sets. Dr. Greenberg noted that research suggests the optimal size of a team is between six and eight members.

After the members are selected, the next step is team building by setting ground rules, finding common ground, and fostering coherence. At the first team meeting, clarify expectations, which are determined by the group, not the leader or facilitator, Dr. Greenberg emphasized. Similarly, the team is responsible for determining its goals, the deliverables, and the timeline. Common ground rules include not opening laptops or checking cell phones during the meeting, acting respectfully, and not interrupting others. Decide how the team will meet (i.e., in-person meetings, conference calls, video conferencing, or a combination thereof). Determine how the team is going to communicate. “Do you really want another 20 emails in your inbox every day or is there another method you could share information by?” he asked. Options include Microsoft SharePoint and Google Docs/Sites.
Team members must understand that they are expected to be responsible for specific assignments/tasks/delays and will be held accountable. “When people own the process, it helps the team be more vigorous and makes the improvement far more likely to succeed and be sustained,” he said. Define team members’ roles by asking what they perceive their role is, why they are on the team, what their purpose is, and what they bring to the table. If they don’t seem to have a role, they may not belong there, Dr. Greenberg said.

**Stages of an Effective Team**

Most teams follow the same path as they evolve from a collection of strangers to a group united by a common goal, Peterson noted. The “forming, storming, norming, and performing” model proposed by psychologist Bruce Tuckman in the 1960s describes four stages of group development. In the 80s, another psychologist, Susan Wheelan, validated this model studying workplace teams for two decades. Dr. Wheelan, who was one of Peterson’s professors at Temple University, elaborates on the four stages.

Stage one is characterized by dependency and inclusion. When human beings who have never interacted with each other gather in a room, they usually depend on the designated leader to tell them what to do, Peterson said. There is limited interaction among the people who are busy sizing each other up on superficial levels, trying to determine what academic degrees they have, and where in the organizational pecking order they fit. “And, of course, as they will learn later, those titles and positions have very little correlation to who is actually best equipped to get things done,” he said.

Recognizing a team at this stage is easy because all of the communication is directed to, and comes through, the designated leader. Additionally, there is no agreement about goals and tasks, and yet nobody is trying to ask about or clarify them.

“As the leader of a stage one team, the best thing you can do is provide safety because that is what people are looking for,” Peterson said. Provide a firm structure for discussion, but at the same time encourage people to participate. Too authoritarian of a culture will inhibit individuals from engaging. “If you’re a member, begin to ask clarifying questions as soon as you feel comfortable doing so,” he said. As a facilitator, make the observation that there seems to be agreement as to the course of action, but provide an opening for people to offer alternative views to engage them in the process.

Stage two is characterized by dependency and fight. This is where the team shifts from being dependent on the leader to challenging him or her. The leader should not take this personally, Peterson said, but rather should view it positively. Team members can help with conflict management by asking questions about goals, tasks, and processes in a positive way, while defusing comments that may be perceived as personal. During this stage, sometimes members start pairing up. These pairings are coalitions for self-protection and a normal part of the process, he noted. While other members may resent the pairings, they could actually help the team become more productive. “So don’t draw firm conclusions about whether coalition forming is positive or negative; see how it functions,” Peterson said. Also, he cautioned against scapegoating a “difficult team member” for the team’s dysfunction. Getting rid of one team member will often not fix the team’s inability to function properly. That person may not be the problem, but rather a symbol of it. “Many teams can’t get beyond this point because they can’t
effectively manage conflict,” Peterson said. However, effective conflict management helps establish trust, builds commitment to the team, and increases members’ willingness to cooperate.

If the team makes it through the conflict, it reaches the third stage, which is characterized by trust and structure. At this point, there’s much more consensus about the team’s goal and how it will be accomplished, some disagreement has been weathered, and the members have figured out how to interact with each other. The danger of stage three is conflict avoidance, when nobody is asking clarifying questions that are important to achieve the goal, Peterson said. Whether a member, leader, or facilitator, the best thing to do is to surface whatever issues are being glossed over, he advised. Don’t be afraid to ask the hard questions.

Stage four is characterized by work and productivity. At this stage, the team spends a lot of time discussing what decisions they need to make and how they are going to make them. “The best thing to do is keep the team functioning at a high level and give it challenging new tasks,” Peterson said, adding that it’s quite an investment to get a team that far along. Only approximately 15 percent of teams actually make it to the fourth stage, he said. The biggest challenge for teams that reach a higher level of development is maintaining its high performance. Members, leaders, and facilitators should share the responsibility of monitoring the team’s progress to ensure that it doesn’t regress to an earlier stage of development. They should watch for poorly-managed conflicts, which can emerge at any moment, Peterson said. Using good conflict management skills can help avoid regression to Stage 2. On the other hand, if a group becomes too controlled, conflict may not be expressed and the quality of the group’s work will suffer as a result. The latter would represent a regression to Stage 3, he added.

Sometimes, it helps to remind the members of the team why they came together and why they are working so hard to create a team-based culture. “It’s about the patient,” Dr. Greenberg concluded. “And everyone on the team needs to remember that.”

Learn How to Develop a High Performing Team

One of the most influential models of teamwork theory, the “forming, storming, norming, and performing” model was published by psychologist Bruce Tuckman in the 1965 article entitled Developmental Sequence in Small Groups. It describes the path that most teams follow as they work their way from a roomful of strangers to an effective team. Understanding the model’s stages of group development can help you develop a high performing project team.

Coupled with her own research, psychologist Susan Wheelan built on Tuckman’s model to develop an integrated model of group development. She covers the four stages in depth in Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders (Fifth Edition) as well as describes why teams are important, how they function, and what makes them productive. Wheelan’s validated Group Development Questionnaire, which accurately assesses group effectiveness and productivity, can be used by teams to develop effective strategies designed to increase team productivity.

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