Leadership Essentials for Healthcare Teams: Overview

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Abstract

Teams established to provide optimum care in the healthcare setting may present themselves in numerous and varying configurations, with the overall intent of bringing complementary skills and abilities of healthcare workers to provide the most beneficial outcomes possible for the patient. Even though healthcare team members each contribute to accomplishing of the team's goals, it is still important that one person be designated as the team leader. The purpose of this article aims to overview the important characteristics that contribute to the success of those in leadership positions, with the intent that more informed team leadership decisions can be made that will ultimately lead to highly improved healthcare environments for all stakeholders involved, especially patients.

Keywords: healthcare, team work, team leader, leadership

Introduction

Teamwork encompasses a variety of interactions between individual team members including communication, sharing, understanding, and helping. These characteristics can, lead to increased productivity by the team and create a sense of cohesiveness between team members. Doing this fosters the kind of unified action that helps accomplish desired goals (Parekh, n.d.). Trust is an important team dynamic that must be developed, as is an understanding of each team member's role in the team, if success and a high working morale are to be achieved.

Variation of Healthcare Teams

Teams in the healthcare setting can be quite diverse. They can be briefly assembled for emergency relief situations, or they can be formed for ongoing hospital operations. They can be spread out across a geographic region, serving remote locations, or condensed into an operating room. A health care team can be minimal in size consisting only of a physician and patient, it can be an enormous organization, international in scope.

The specific purposes that prompt the formation of health care teams can vary widely, as can their activities, and their goals. Regardless there are certain measurable commonalities between successful teams that can be compared, learned, and incorporated into other teams that would like to achieve success (Mitchell, et al., 2012).

Team Support and Collaboration

Healthcare has evolved at an amazing rate and will continue to evolve even faster as innovative technologies make their way into daily workflows of healthcare workers and the lifestyles of patients. It is

rare to see a healthcare worker operating independently, without the support of a team. In many cases, this type of behavior could actually be frowned upon, and could be detrimental to the patient (Mitchell, et al., 2012).

One of the reasons that it is frowned upon for healthcare workers to work in isolation is that healthcare continues to become a more and more complex field of endeavor. It would be nearly impossible for one healthcare worker to keep up with all the available information that could be important in a particular clinical setting. As a result, healthcare workers need to collaborate with other healthcare workers, who have specific complementary skills, or detailed information, so the team posses the constellation of skills that will provide patients with the best care possible. Physicians may need to rely on pharmacists, dieticians, and administrators, for example, in order to provide optimum care for their patients, and this number of interacting individual promises to continue expanding in complexity into the future (Mitchell, et al., 2011).

The continued growth of complexity in healthcare makes it difficult and potentially dangerous for one healthcare professional to practice without help from others. Healthcare workers from varying disciplines need to combine their talents and medical knowledge in a coordinated effort to provide the best care for the patient. To do this most effectively there should be effort put forth, to fully develop the team dynamic which can only lead to optimal results (Mitchell, et al., 2012). Eighty-six percent of physicians think that a much improved quality of care can be obtained when trained professional healthcare workers who posses complementary skills work in harmony for

a desired outcome (Audet, Davis, & Schoenbaum, 2006).

Essential Characteristics of Team-Leader

In order for healthcare teams to work in harmony to achieve a desired outcome, it is necessary to have a team leader who can direct the movements of the team as much as the maestro directs musicians in the performance of a symphony. A team leader listens to the reports of the disparate professionals and blends their actions into a coordinated whole (Parekh, n.d.). Which one of the team members would make the best leader? Should it be the member with the most university degrees, or should it be the one with the most charming personality? Cloud (2006) tells us that there are three characteristics that tend to be found in the best leaders and the most successful people: they have acquired all the skills their discipline demands, they are good at developing mutually beneficial relationships with others, and they have character.

The skill sets necessary to perform professionally well, of course, vary in specifics between disciplines. According to Cloud (2006), some generalities can be drawn to define these skills across disciplines. According to Cloud, these skills can be divided into two categories, personal skills, like emotional intelligence, and functional skills, those skills needed to function in an organization as a whole. In addition, there are job skills, that are specific to the particular profession, and skills that are specific to the job title of the individual within the organization and the profession.

Building mutually beneficial relationships is important, because one individual may not have all the

necessary professional skills and abilities, or all the necessary resources to carry out the functions or complete the processes that relate to the success of every project, mission, or endeavor. Teaming up with others, who do have the extra skills, abilities, and resources necessary, then becomes vital to achieving a desired outcome (Cloud, 2006). One simple example of this can be seen in the international exchange of healthcare workers between facilities in Thailand and facilities in other countries. Everyone benefits from this type of exchange, because the healthcare workers from each country become familiar with techniques and methods that they may never have encountered in their own country's healthcare systems, and they can bring this new knowledge back home to their respective organizations to improve patient care.

Character, in the opinion of Cloud (2006), is the most essential of the characteristics that determine leadership potential that can lead to the most successful outcomes. In the view of Howard (2013), character can be considered as those traits leaders have developed that allow them to transcend the circumstances of the present moment and react appropriately despite outside influences that try to push them in inappropriate directions. Even though some people may seem to be top notch leaders and may seem to have great success, without the attribute of good character, in the eyes of Howard, they are not truly successful and can never be truly successful unless they finally develop this character. They will always be looking behind, afraid that the people they have hurt along the road to success will catch up to them and make them pay. These individuals will never be able to trust in the others with whom they partner in business or in their daily lives,

because they know that these others may not be trusting them either. They often lead lonely, and miserable lives, even though they may gain great success and be surrounded by many people who respect them.

Howard (2013) also believes that the qualities that make up good character are within each of us. To be a successful leader, we need to evaluate these qualities to determine our personal strengths and weaknesses. By doing this, we can initiate measures to improve in our areas of weakness in order to become more successful in our endeavors. It is more beneficial, Howard mentions, to improve our qualities of character that need improvement than it is to try and improve our negative behaviors. Once the qualities of good character become established, the negative behavioral traits that lead to suboptimal outcomes will subside by themselves.

Leadership in Nursing Team

In a nursing team specific context, de Moura, et al. (2010) identifies leadership qualities similar to those mentioned above. They found that the qualities most sought in a nursing team leader were knowledge and skills specific to the particular clinical setting, an understanding of the group's interactions in the broader context of all group interactions within the organization, and interpersonal skills demonstrating the person's respect for other professional's opinions and concerns. This last characteristic is the one that most relates to the most important characteristic mentioned by Cloud (2010), character.

In a program underpinned by leadership characteristics defined by Bennis (2003), which hold close similarities to aspects of Cloud's (2010)

characteristics of character, Hendricks, Cope, and Harris (2010) set out to demonstrate that important traits of nursing leadership could be learned. The program offered training to the participants that helped them to become aware of leadership qualities and encouraged them to reflect upon these qualities and to put these qualities into action, working side-by-side with a mentor in a real life team project. This combination seemed to work rather well as evidenced by improvement on all questions answered by participants in a pre-post assessment of the program.

Discussion

In this paper we have examined the growing necessity for team-based healthcare and at qualities of leadership that can be learned and replicated within the healthcare setting. The increasing use of healthcare teams to meet the demands of emerging healthcare strategies promises to provide improved clinical performance and patient outcomes. However, positive outcomes may not be realized without sufficient consideration being given to the leadership needed to coalesce teams into a harmoniously functioning whole that allows the team to produce at a much higher level than the sum of its individual outputs would suggest. This leadership can be developed; within the existing and emerging healthcare workforce. In developing this leadership, it is important to use the along guidelines of leadership qualities suggested by various authors. These qualities should be examined carefully as they apply specifically to healthcare, and should be developed to take full advantage of the transformative benefits that team-oriented healthcare has to offer.

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