

# ARTICLES

## Sustaining Operational Excellence

### The Power of Thank You Notes

This article is second in a new Studer Group series on how to sustain gains in operational excellence. A Culture of Service and Operational Excellence attracts and retains talented staff, financially out-performs the competition, has excellent clinical outcomes, is growing according to plan, is full of employee-generated ideas for improvement, and maintains patient, employee, and physician satisfaction at high levels.

In building a Culture of Excellence, the following key six activities should be implemented in sequence to ensure maximum effectiveness, and must be built on a solid foundation where top management supports the culture by modeling what it means to be a great student and teacher.

Must Haves<sup>®</sup>, in order of suggested sequence are:

- Effective leader rounding,
- Employee Thank You Notes,
- Discharge phone calls to patients,
- Key words at key times (i.e. scripting),
- Aligning leader evaluations with desired outcomes and,
- Employee selection, especially the first 90 days of employment.

The Must Haves will position your hospital for improved patient, employee, and physician satisfaction. Satisfaction improvement in those areas will lead to increased volume, decreased length of stay, better clinical outcomes, and better staff retention which leads to better bottom lines.

Tools available from Studer Group:

Studer Group Coaches hold weekly conference calls in which they share best practices, discuss challenges, and collectively explore how to improve performance for clients. As a result, Studer Group's Toolbox offers hundreds of ways to improve service, retain talent, and develop leaders. However, when I speak with health care leaders whose organizations are not reaching their goals, I usually learn that the main problem is not that they need more "tools." In fact, they are usually implementing many activities, but perhaps not the most important ones, or at least not consistently or effectively.

My goal is to share practical knowledge that can easily be sent to leaders throughout the organization to help them in their focus and implementation. Your comments on these thoughts and how you utilize them are always appreciated. Please forward any thoughts suggestions, or requests for copies of past articles to: [quintstuder@studergroup.com](mailto:quintstuder@studergroup.com).

The first article in this periodic series focused on Leader Rounding, Must Have #1. In this letter, I will cover the second Must Have, Employee Thank You Notes.

### **Must Have #2: Employee Thank You Notes**

Creating the right sequence of action is important in implementing a Culture of Excellence. Employee Thank You Notes build on Must Have #1, Leader Rounding. During leader rounding:

1. Systems are fixed
2. Needed tools and equipment secured
3. Key questions are asked of patients and employees
4. Compliments are given when leaders finish rounding making sure they recognize employees about whom positive comments have been made or about staff who were observed taking positive action to help a patient, fellow employee, etc.

The next step is to take what we have seen or heard and ensure the staff is receiving further recognition. My experience over the years is that notes to staff, especially to the individual's home, have great impact. In fact, I believe they lead to improved patient, employee, and physician satisfaction, as well as reducing turnover.

**WHY?** It allows staff to read positive notes about what they do, reinforces desired behavior and is something staff can share with their family. These Thank You Notes are not thrown away. They are saved and treasured by employees and families. Who knows, it may help recruit the next generation of health care workers.

### **Hardwiring Thank You Notes into Your Organization**

To have significant impact, leaders must do more than send a note to an employee who is mentioned by a patient or family member. By using the approach below, a much broader group of staff are impacted. To do this, I suggest a hardwired system be put in place. Action steps to hardwiring:

- Review the number of staff in each department and create a system where a group of leaders each week e-mail the CEO names of a staff member he/she would like to have received a note. My rule of thumb is to write one note for every 100 employees (up to 15 per week).
- The CEO requests that each leader sends him/her the name, home address, and a brief overview of what the employee did to merit a Thank You note. The number of Thank You note requests a leader sends to the CEO varies according to number of staff in the leader's department. A leader with a large department may send one name a week. A leader with a small department may send one name every month and a leader with a very small department may send one name every quarter.
- Someone in administration then collects the information from the leaders who were scheduled to write a note that week. They write the employee's home address on the envelope and attach the e-mail message from the leader to a blank note which is given to the CEO. The assistant or CEO then checks off the leader for that week in a Thank You grid so they know each leader is sending in their Thank You requests.
- The CEO writes the notes to employees using the leader information to personalize each Thank You note. These are then given to an administrative assistant to mail or can be mailed directly by the CEO.

**This single Must Have creates multiple results. Here are a few:**

1. The employee is very appreciative of the CEO and the leader who sent their name in;
2. The department leader gets additional opportunities to reward and recognize through reviewing whom to submit; and
3. The employee who receives the note shares it with family and friends impacting them.

This might even lead to recruiting our next generation of Fire Starters.

These notes are never thrown away. It is even as powerful when sending Thank You's to physicians. Most importantly, I have found a tremendous advantage to hardwiring Thank You Notes. If they are not hardwired, they aren't written as often, and individuals who should have received a note may not.

Let me close with a recent story: A few weeks back I was in a hospital and meeting with the members of the executive team and the nursing leaders. A nurse leader told the story of a nurse on her unit who had a tough day and went home very discouraged. When she arrived at home there was a note from the CEO in the mail. The note helped her put things into perspective. She said getting that note at that time made a difference. She returned to work the next day recommitted to making a difference herself. Never underestimate the difference one person (or one action) can make.

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