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## Organizational Values Statements

*Healthcare executives need to lead the organization's culture in reviewing and implementing values statements.*

Ethics and values play a fundamental role in healthcare organizations' culture. There are several basic characteristics of an ethically driven organization: shared mission and vision, strong inherent core values and culture, ethical practices, and ethical leadership.

Despite the importance of the organization's mission, vision and values, however, they tend to receive less leadership attention than other responsibilities such as strategy, operations and structure. The same is true regarding the attention given to creating and maintaining strong core values and ethics.

In complex healthcare organizations it is impossible to provide policies or guidelines to direct *all* clinical and administrative behavior or to help staff make tough decisions. As organization and management consultant and author Patrick Lencioni noted in a July 2002 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Core values are the deeply ingrained principles that guide all of a company's actions; they serve as its cultural cornerstone." An organization's core values set the standards of conduct that are considered important and therefore

guide the behavior of individuals in the organization. The term "values" encompasses both right and wrong expectant behaviors.

*All staff should be aware of, accept and integrate the organization's values into their decisions and behaviors.*

A vision presents what the organization wants to become and gives direction for the organization's future. The mission statement delineates a clear, concise and specific description of an organization's purpose. A values statement clarifies how the organization will conduct its activities to achieve the organization's mission and vision. It is a statement about how the organization will value patients, staff, suppliers and the community. Values statements, reflecting common morality, frequently emphasize respect, integrity, trust, caring and excellence.

Where vision and mission statements describe the organization's goals, a values statement represents the core principles within the organization's culture. All staff should be

aware of, accept and integrate the organization's values into their decisions and behaviors.

The organization's values can influence all the actions and decisions related to the mission and vision. For example, when a question arises regarding a trade-off between profit and quality, it is the organization's values that will likely drive the response.

Some organizational values statements are implemented effectively and serve as a guide for staff decisions and behaviors. In many organizations, however, statements are carefully crafted and adopted only to be set aside, rarely referenced or just ignored. In other organizations the values statements are treated as the latest marketing program with posters and pocket cards but little substance.

Worst of all are the organizations whose values statements conflict with the organization's actual practices and behaviors. Rather than fostering and maintaining a positive culture and setting an ethical tone for behaviors and practices, such situations undermine staff morale, breed cynicism and can lead to the acceptance of unethical practices.

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**Need for Values Review**

The values statement should describe the guiding principles by which the staff is expected to function to achieve the organization’s mission. Due to the importance of the values statement to the organization’s culture, it should be regularly reviewed. This is similar to the need to periodically review clinical and administrative policy statements such as end-of-life or conflict-of-interest policies or strategic or financial plans that are regularly reviewed by executive leadership and the board.

The values review is not done primarily for the purpose of changing or modifying the wording of the values statement. Rather, the review should be an in-depth assessment of specific ethics-grounded values and the assimilation of those values into the organization’s day-to-day culture, practices and behaviors of the organization’s staff.

**Suggested Values Review Process**

Following the decision to undertake an organizational values review, a values review workgroup should be established to lead the process. The workgroup should include people beyond the executive office and board. It should consist of administrative and clinical leaders; ethics, patient safety, compliance and quality improvement professionals; and community representatives. The workgroup also should consider the use of an outside resource, such as a professional who is knowledgeable in organizational ethics and cultural change, to assist with the review.

To facilitate the review, the workgroup will need to rigorously examine both

the beliefs and practices within the organization. The workgroup should host a series of focus groups with frontline clinicians and staff to explore staff members’ understanding of the organization’s values and the extent to which the values drive their behaviors to achieve the organization’s mission.

Identification of specific examples reflecting the values of the organization should be encouraged during group meetings. Those behaviors that appear to run counter to the organization’s values statement also should be identified and discussed. The use of a staff survey could aid the process of understanding employees’ level of awareness and application of the current values statement. In addition, the workgroup might examine how the organization’s leadership actions reflect the organization’s espoused values, especially when difficult decisions or conflicts arise.

This broad-based review should help determine if there is a gap between the organization’s stated values and its culture and help identify areas in which there is a need for improvement. The review may also indicate a need for leadership to clarify the organization’s values statement or, more likely, indicate the need for more attention to making the values a more visible and active part of the organization.

After facilitating the extensive review process, the workgroup should report to the executive leadership and board, including suggested changes to the values statement. The best values statements are not just a list of lofty words like “integrity” and “commitment”—the values statement should include a

brief description for each word or phrase, providing greater detail of why and how specific values-related words or phrases are to be actualized.

An organizationwide implementation plan is essential. Without a carefully planned dissemination initiative the values statement can fail to translate into organizational practices and behaviors.

*The most important way to spread organizational values is by having leadership behaviors reflect those values day in and day out.*

**Dissemination and Application of Statements**

Leadership must own and participate in the values review process in an active and visible way. The workgroup, however, can help in the effort to disseminate the updated document throughout the organization.

The educational push of this initiative should not mean simply handing out a document but, rather, fostering discussions with leadership regarding how to make the specific values obvious and integrated throughout the organization. These discussions need not end following a formal educational thrust; discussions should be ongoing within all the organization’s departments.

In addition, the values document should be a living document, regularly noted and referenced. Some of the strongest reinforcement of the organization’s values comes through the stories and examples of how leadership and staff responded to difficult

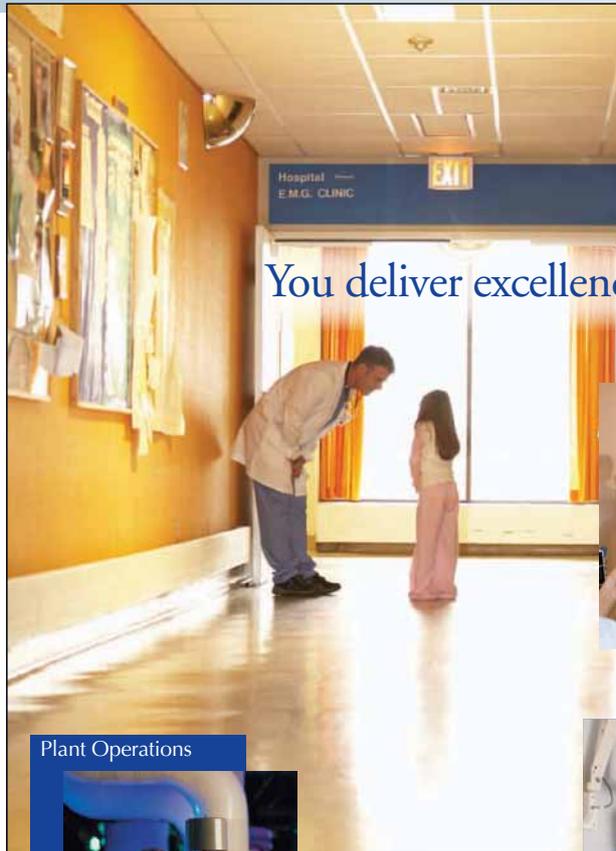
decisions by putting organizational values into action.

As was pointed out by Lencioni, if values are “going to really take hold in your organization, core values need to be integrated into every employee-related process—hiring methods, performance management systems, criteria for promotions and rewards, and even dismissal policies.”

This review and ongoing dissemination effort will take time and commitment; in fact, it will be a continuous process. However, the time and effort are justified as they can foster the alignment of organizational values with organizational culture. Ultimately the most important way to spread organizational values is by having leadership behaviors reflect those values day in and day out. ▲

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