THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WORKFORCE

Creating Joy, Meaning, and Safer Health Care

Lucian Leape Institute

Report of the Roundtable on
Joy and Meaning in Work and Workforce Safety

LUCIAN LEAPE INSTITUTE
AT THE
NATIONAL PATIENT
SAFETY FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The health care workforce is composed of well-intentioned, well-prepared people in a variety of roles and clinical disciplines who do their best every day to ensure that patients are well cared for. It is from this mission of caring for people in times of their greatest vulnerability and need that health care workers find meaning in their work, as well as their experience of joy.

Yet many health care workers suffer harm—emotional and physical—in the course of providing care. Many are subjected to being bullied, harassed, demeaned, ignored, and in the most extreme cases, physically assaulted. They are also physically injured by working in conditions of known and preventable environmental risk. In addition, production and cost pressures have reduced complex, intimate, caregiving relationships into a series of demanding tasks performed under severe time constraints. Under these conditions, it is difficult for caregivers to find purpose and joy in their work, or to meet the challenge of making health care safe for patients they serve.

Vulnerable Workplaces

The basic precondition of a safe workplace is protection of the physical and psychological safety of the workforce. Both are conspicuously absent or considered optional in many care-delivery organizations. The prevalence of physical harm experienced by the health care workforce is striking, much higher than in other industries. Up to a third of nurses experience back or musculoskeletal injuries in a year, and many have unprotected contact with blood-borne pathogens.

Psychological harm is also common. In many health care organizations, staff are not treated with respect—or, worse yet, they are routinely treated with disrespect. Emotional abuse, bullying, and even threats of physical assault and learning by humiliation are all often accepted as "normal" conditions of the health care workplace, creating a culture of fear and intimidation that saps joy and meaning from work.

The absence of cultural norms that create the preconditions of psychological and physical safety obscures meaning of work and drains motivation. The costs of burnout, litigation, lost work hours,

employee turnover, and the inability to attract new-comers to caring professions are wasteful and add to the burden of illness. Disrespectful treatment of workers increases the risk of patient injury.

What Can Be Done?

An environment of mutual respect is critical if the workforce is to find joy and meaning in work. In modern health care, teamwork is essential for safe practice, and teamwork is impossible in the absence of mutual respect.

Former CEO of Alcoa Paul O'Neill advises that, to find joy and meaning in their daily work, each person in the workforce must be able to answer affirmatively to three questions each day:

1. Am I treated with dignity and respect by everyone?
2. Do I have what I need so I can make a contribution that gives meaning to my life?
3. Am I recognized and thanked for what I do?

Developing Effective Organizations

To create a safe and supportive work environment, health care organizations must become effective, high-reliability organizations, characterized by continuous learning, improvement, teamwork, and transparency. Effective organizations care for their employees and continuously meet preconditions not subject to annual priority and budget setting. The most fundamental precondition is workforce safety, physical and psychological. The workforce needs to know that their safety is an enduring and non-negotiable priority for the governing board, CEO, and organization.

Knowing that their well-being is a priority enables the workforce to be meaningfully engaged in their work, to be more satisfied, less likely to experience burnout, and to deliver more effective and safer care.

Achieving this vision requires leadership. The governing board, CEO, and organizational leaders create the cultural norms and conditions that produce workforce safety, meaning, and joy. Effective leaders shape safety culture through management practices that demonstrate a priority to safety and compassionately engage the workforce to speak about and report errors, mistakes, and hazards that threaten safety—their own or their patients'. Joy and meaning will be created when the workforce feels valued, safe from harm, and part of the solutions for change.

Recommendations

Strategy 1: Develop and embody shared core values of mutual respect and civility; transparency and truth telling; safety of all workers and patients; and alignment and accountability from the boardroom through the front lines.

Strategy 2: Adopt the explicit aim to eliminate harm to the workforce and to patients.

Strategy 3: Commit to creating a high-reliability organization (HRO) and demonstrate the discipline to achieve highly reliable performance. This will require creating a learning and improvement system and adopting evidence-based management skills for reliability.

Strategy 4: Create a learning and improvement system.

Strategy 5: Establish data capture, database, and performance metrics for accountability and improvement.

Strategy 6: Recognize and celebrate the work and accomplishments of the workforce, regularly and with high visibility.

Strategy 7: Support industry-wide research to design and conduct studies that will explore issues and conditions in health care that are harming our workforce and our patients.