The Million-Dollar Question: “How Can We Get Our Senior Leaders to Hold People Accountable?”

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I presented a webinar on the Nuts and Bolts of Accountability in late January. In the week after the webinar, I received the same question (worded differently) from many different viewers:

• "How can we get our senior leaders to hold people accountable?"

• "How can we convince senior leaders that accountability for behaviors is a must?"

• "Can you have accountability if senior management is weak in holding people accountable?"

These questions triggered a vivid memory from the year 1982. My team and I were conducting HOSPITALity workshops for all employees in our hospital. In several workshops, when we talked about senior leaders' commitment to raising the bar on service, people asked, "Does that mean the president is going to make Sheila (not her real name) behave like a human being?" This question was asked so often that I finally made an appointment with the president. Because this situation was so emotion-laden or me, I have a particularly vivid memory of that conversation.

Me: "I'm in a tough position and I need your help. In the HOSPITALity workshops, I'm passionately conveying your message about wanting people to provide exceptional service. And some people are asking, 'Does this mean the president is going to get rid of Sheila?' As you well know, Sheila is notorious around this medical center for being uncooperative and abusive. And yet, she is still here—seeming to be untouchable. What am I supposed to say to people when they ask me whether our new standards apply to her too?"

Him: (sighing, gripping his forehead in pain): "But she's so good at her job!"

Me: "So, if others are good at the technical requirements of their jobs, but horrendous with people, is that okay? It seems like you're saying that the JOB is the technical work, and great service is nice, but not essential."

Him: "No, it IS essential."

Me: "Well then, you see how you hurt your message by exempting your own secretary?"

Him: "I see that, but it really gives me a headache to think about losing her."
Me: “So, what should I say when employees ask me about her and whether you will apply our standards to her?”

Him: “Tell them that it’s a change for all of us to treat great service performance as a requirement of the job and that it’s a must for the sake of our mission and professional pride. Tell them we need to show some compassion and patience as leaders begin to deal with performance issues we’ve let slide in the past. Tell them I realize it needs to start with me and that I definitely will apply the standards to my own staff.”

After shaking in my shoes throughout this conversation, I continued to shake in my shoes, wondering if he would follow through and deal with Sheila who had become the symbol of the president’s double standards. The good news: Two weeks later, Sheila was gone. Because human resource actions are confidential, I don’t know what happened behind the scenes. But I do know that within 24 hours of her departure, word had spread around the whole organization, “WOW, the president is really serious! SHEILA is gone!” And suddenly, our new standards appeared to have teeth. I truly believe this led to a giant step forward in our quest for the great patient experience.

So, when asked about how to influence senior management accountability, I suggest planning an “intervention” and raising the issue directly with the chief executive first, and later (if invited) with the whole executive team. An intervention about what? The disconnect!

The Accountability Disconnect

- Senior management says, “We hold you accountable.”
- Managers don’t hold their teams accountable and there is no consequence for them. Patient satisfaction continues to be disappointing.
- Frustrated, senior management repeats, “We hold you accountable.”
- And so it goes.

The Direct Approach with Senior Management

In a nutshell, in a genuine and caring fashion, ask, “How serious are you? Serious enough to create consequences? Serious enough to renew the focus on raising the bar and accountability with our entire management team?

Who can do this? Someone with a lot of guts. Possibly you, possibly a committee (safety in numbers), possibly a service champion who is ON the executive team. You could bring to bear patient satisfaction data and complaints to position the problem as meriting attention.
**The purpose:** Help the organization achieve a breakthrough in patient satisfaction by strengthening accountability, starting at the top.

**A Diagonal Approach:** HELP senior leaders hold managers accountable. It's a given. Executives are swamped and just don’t have time to design communications that will reinforce accountability. In my years as the executive team’s strategy coach, I learned that if I wanted execs to communicate and reinforce the accountability message often, then I needed to design the communications that would make it EASY for them to do that.
Attachment 1:
Start Your Meeting with a Bang!
Icebreakers, Energizers & Games

Intervention with Executives about Lack of Accountability:
Sample Presentation

The purpose: Help the organization achieve a breakthrough in patient satisfaction by strengthening accountability, starting at the top.

1. State your positive intent:

   “You have communicated clearly and often how committed you are to having all of us provide the exceptional patient and family experience; and we respect your commitment greatly. We’re here because we want to help. We have great and dedicated people and we know it’s possible.”

2. Explain your specific purpose:

   “We want to talk with you about a disconnect we see that we believe is interfering with getting to GREAT. And that disconnect is all about holding people accountable.”

3. Compare rhetoric to reality:

   “As we understand it, you have made it clear to nurse managers that they are accountable for their staff’s behavior and that you expect to see staff behavior that fosters a high level of patient satisfaction. As you know, there are pockets of the organization where the behavior is noticeably disappointing. Yet, nothing has been done to turn the situation around.”

4. Give examples without naming names.

   “Patients have complained about a certain nurse for years. And she is still here behaving like she always has. You tell nurse managers that they are accountable for their staff’s behavior. Yet, when some don’t deal with this behavior, there are no consequences for the nurse manager and the performance problems drag us all down.”

5. The consequences for patients, the organization and the credibility of the senior leaders: The result is that the patient and family experience suffers and your credibility in the eyes of staff suffers as well.

6. Your suggestion:
“For the sake of our patients, reputation and your credibility, we would like to see a determined effort to enforce the standards we say we hold dear.”

7. How?

“What you're in a better position to know that, we have a few ideas.”

8. “You could convene all managers for an ‘Accountability Summit’. You could talk with them directly about service performance being too often unexceptional or inconsistent. You could acknowledge that leaders (including you) have not held people accountable to the standards we've set, and that you want to change that. Appeal to everyone to join you in raising the bar and effectively holding people accountable. You would need to make clear that you are willing to lose staff who are technically skilled but weak in service.... that a warm body is NOT better than NO BODY if that warm body is unable or unwilling to provide a great patient experience.”

9. Then, together, develop a plan. For instance, target levels for satisfaction in each unit, a timeframe for reaching the target, clarity about consequences for those who don’t get there and coaching and/or training to help managers succeed in their approaches.
Dear Manager/Supervisor,

As leaders within our hospital and community, you play a powerful role in mobilizing our teams to achieve improvements in service performance within our hospital. I want to share my view of our leadership roles, so that we are leading the change.

1. **We need to be positive role models.**
   - We’re in a fishbowl. All eyes are checking to see if we’re practicing what we preach. We need to use our power and visibility to be exemplary in the way we do greetings, handoffs, and goodbyes. We need to try out and make some improvements in our own approaches.
   - I hope we all tell colleagues that we intend to employ suggested behavior—that we know we are not exempt. We need to show that we are open to learning and becoming more effective.
   - And of very great symbolic importance: I hope we will all make a concerted effort to more consistently greet and acknowledge every colleague on our teams and throughout our hospital. We can help our colleagues feel recognized and important.

2. **We need to repeatedly communicate our commitment to going from good to great in service quality.** These message points seem very important:
   - Satisfying our patients and families - that's why we're here. We can make an important difference and feel greater pride as professionals by moving to an impressive level of service quality.
   - We are putting standard approaches in place, so we can use best practices when we're interacting with patients, families, physicians and each other. Our scripts help us know the behavior and words that will meet their needs and satisfy them.
3. We need to carry out the leadership actions key to following through at every point in our strategy. We need to work with our teams to tailor approaches to their specific jobs. We need to coach them and hold them to higher standards. We need to offer our support and also thank them often for impressive performance.

With the talented and committed staff we have throughout our hospital, I’m confident we can do what it takes to elevate patient, family and staff satisfaction. Thank you for your leadership and your commitment. And please don’t hesitate to share your suggestions and feedback as we proceed.
Email Prompts for the Executive Team’s Use

As part of my Proposed Employee Communications Plan, I developed a series of emails for executive team members to send to their direct reports (department heads). My intent: That each executive would send these emails (on a schedule) to their own direct reports.

After getting the green light from executives about the plan, I convened a meeting of the executives' assistants. I explained the purpose, plan and schedule for these emails. We then discussed how best to make sure they happen. They decided:

- Each assistant would prepare the email for the executive and show it to him or her for customization and approval.
- Then, the executive would push "Send".
- The assistants asked me to prompt them a few days before the "Send" date for each email, which I happily did because I could edit each email further based on recent events.

The results were amazing. Since many of the emails asked for feedback from managers, executives received an influx of brief information from their reporting departments. The goals for the service excellence strategy and the strategy itself stayed top-of-mind in the organization.

Sample E-mail Prompts

#1

Subject: Update on Service Excellence

When I imagine what our hospital will feel like to our patients and other customers when we ALL do a WOW job of greetings, handoffs and goodbyes, I'm excited!

I'm curious to know how you're going about working on the GREAT greetings, handoffs and goodbyes that we discussed at our recent Leadership Summit on Leading the Way from Good to Great.

Will you please send me a quick email to let me know?

Thanks.

#2
Subject: Let's connect!

I'm curious to know how you're doing in implementing great greetings, handoffs and goodbyes. Please send me a couple of sentences telling me what's happening. Thanks much.

#3

Subject: Service Excellence Implementation

At this point, I'm interested to know what you consider to be the obstacles to instituting GREAT greetings, handoffs and goodbyes. Please let me know and also, do you have ideas about how to address this obstacle?

#4

Subject: Scripts for Greetings

I would like to put together and circulate a few examples of the scripts people have developed for great greetings. If you have a script that you think is a WOW script, will you please send it to me, along with a sentence telling me the position(s) that will be employing the script.

Thank you

#5

Subject: Scripts for Goodbyes

I would like to put together and circulate a few examples of the scripts people have developed for saying great GOODBYES to a patient or other customer. If you have a script that you think is a great script, will you please send it to me, along with a sentence telling me the position(s) that will be employing the script?

Thank you.

#6

Subject: Scripts for Hand-offs

I would like to put together and circulate a few examples of the scripts people have developed for Hand-offs. If you have a script that you think is a great handoff script, will you please send it to me, along with a sentence telling me the positions involved?

Thank you

#7

Subject: Have you seen it?
I'm interested to know if you've noticed any improvements in greetings, handoffs or goodbyes throughout our hospital. Please drop me a line to tell me what you have observed.

#8
Subject: Staff involvement in Service Excellence

I'm hearing about some good examples of managers who have successfully engaged their staff in developing or customizing scripts for caring points within their jobs.

How about you? Have you tried to involve your staff in designing great customer service? If so, please let me know what you've done.

THANKS.

#9
Subject: How do you rate yourself?

As leaders, we are bigger than life to our staff and have a responsibility to be role models of the kinds of performance we expect of our team.

How would you rate yourself as a role model of great greetings?
--in the hallways?
--in the elevators?
--of your staff at the start of their day?

I can't stand the thought that any of us would want to be our staff's excuse for not doing their all to demonstrate great customer service.

#10
Subject: Dealing with "no"

Are you finding any employees resistant to instituting designed greetings? How are people responding to the idea?

#11
Subject: Update on Instituting Great Greetings

Please send me a paragraph about your team's progress in implementing great greetings. Thanks.

#12
Subject: Ta-daah!

Ta-daahs are in order for all of you who have moved forward with great greetings with your team. I realize that you have many priorities competing for your
attention. Making it happen is a testament to your commitment. I really appreciate it.

#13
Subject: Patients tell us...

Here are some comments we've received on our patient surveys recently. Your work on designing great experiences in customer service encounters is showing results.

Quote
Quote
Quote

#14
Subject: Patient survey results

I was looking at our patient satisfaction results and realizing how many of the priority items involve connecting to the patient as a person. Specifically:

Item:
Item:
Item:

By working with staff to craft and institute great greetings, handoffs and goodbyes in which we make a PERSONAL connection, we can influence satisfaction on these important factors...

If you have other ideas about how we can strengthen satisfaction in these areas, please let me know.

#15
Subject: What would help?

In your efforts to develop and institute great scripts for greetings, handoffs and goodbyes, what would help (other than more time)? I want to provide whatever support people need to get to a WOW level.

#16
Subject: Whassup? Is that how you spell it?

Anyway, I want to know how you’re doing with developing and instituting great handoffs of customers from one staff member or department to another. Every effort we make to ease people’s way during handoffs will make our system more seamless for our patients and families.
Please send me an example of a handoff you and your team are using to smooth your customers' transitions from place to place and person to person. I'll circulate some so everyone can learn from each other's best practices.

#17
Subject: A Reminder

Are you taking care to greet employees, patients and visitors in the hallways? As leaders, all eyes are upon us.

#18
Subject: Elevator greetings

As I was riding the elevator the other day, I was thinking about the opportunity we all have to impress visitors with our warmth and caring as we ride together in the elevator. Here's a reminder to:

- Smile, make eye contact and say hello whether you know the person or not.
- Make small talk. Connect.
- Make people feel at home when they wish they were.

#19
Subject: Oh no, not again!

Is that what you’re thinking? "Here goes again sending emails about customer service!

I do hope you’ll read and act on each and every one. I want us to achieve and sustain WOW greetings, handoffs and goodbyes. I know we are capable of moving from good to great if we put our collective minds to it.

#20
Subject: Walk-Throughs

I'm looking for five people to volunteer to walk through our hospital to note what kinds of greetings, handoffs and goodbyes are happening. Who's game to do it?

#21
Subject: Are you ready for prime time?

Can I send a mystery guest to your area yet -- to see great greetings in action? Please let me know.

#22
Subject: "Don't be a stranger."
A friend of mine was saying that her grandmother would urge her to visit by saying, "Don’t be a stranger!"

As we get better at greeting guests to our hospital, they will feel less like strangers in our maze of buildings and people and they will choose us more often when they need care and service.

Acknowledging everyone including people we don’t know as we walk through lobbies, hallways, elevators and other public areas will add warmth to our environment. A simple nod and smile is all that’s needed.

#23

Subject: Send kudos please

Have you seen colleagues perform a great greeting, handoff or goodbye with a customer or coworker? Please tell me about it, and I’ll be sure they know they got fan mail.

#24

Subject: I dare you!

Are you proud of your team? Are they ready to show off their phone greetings, handoffs and goodbyes? Ask your team if they’re ready to compete for a customer service award, and if so, let me know.

Here’s how it works.

• Over a period of two weeks, mystery callers will call your department. They will experience firsthand how your team members handle greetings, handoffs and goodbyes.

• The mystery callers will not only call receptionists. They will call multiple phone numbers/people in your area.

• Those teams that create a WOW impression on the caller in 9 out of 10 mystery calls will receive that the team can spend on something they want for the team.

Deadline for volunteering is .

I dare you.

#25

Subject: Your suggestions, please.
You’re aware of our goal of achieving and sustaining a WOW level of patient/customer satisfaction. What suggestions do you have about how we can help every manager be successful designing and implementing WOW experiences in everyday encounters with our customers?

We’re looking for inspirational or awareness-raising slogans that help us progress on our patient satisfaction goal.