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## Creating a Culture of Engagement in Health Care

*A Guest Article from Ted A James, MD, MHCM*

Organizational culture in health care fascinates me. From personal experience and working with other leaders to improve health care, I've seen how powerful a force culture is in determining organizational outcomes. Most successful health care transformational efforts, in my observations, are driven by front-line clinicians. This is because clinicians are familiar with their patients' needs, the care delivery process, and the strengths and weaknesses of their clinical work environments. As a result, clinician engagement is critical to driving performance and leading change in health care. A passionate and motivated team can move mountains. We need engaged clinicians to help us develop new care models, improve quality, and respond to crises. Regardless of our aims or strategy, we cannot succeed without a culture of clinician engagement.

### **The status of engagement in today's health care systems**

According to research, organizations with high levels of engagement outperform those with low levels of engagement. Building trusting relationships between clinicians and administrators allow the organization to function more effectively, adapt to change more quickly, and achieve excellence in patient care.

Unfortunately, many organizations are unable to achieve high levels of engagement and struggle to thrive in today's health-care ecosystem. However, the truth is that leaders have a great deal of influence over clinician engagement. The key is to strengthen personal relationships and create an environment where people can perform at their best.

### **A psychological approach to engagement**

Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, is perhaps best known for his theory of psychological health based on prioritizing the fulfillment of innate human needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs serves as an intriguing framework for approaching engagement. It comprises a series of basic, psychological, and emotional needs that eventually lead to self-actualization, defined as becoming your best self. Thus, people must ideally meet lower-level needs before moving on to higher-level needs.

For example, if a clinician is concerned about not having the necessary resources to perform their duties safely, it will be difficult to engage fully in a new process improvement initiative. As leaders, we must recognize that we cannot get the most out of our teams unless we address their underlying needs.

Burnout in health care is a major threat to clinicians' underlying basic needs, and it must be addressed as a priority. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to wellness, which includes measuring burnout, redesigning clinical workflows to improve 'ease of practice', and normalizing self-care.

Next, we must address psychological and emotional needs by encouraging teamwork and collaborative practice. When people work within effective teams, their level of engagement rises. People who feel like they are part of a team at work are more than twice as likely to be fully engaged.

Creating a psychologically safe and inclusive environment is a critical aspect of building effective teams. Harvard professor Amy Edmonson defines psychological safety as when people feel secure, inquisitive, free to speak up, and safe to be vulnerable. This type of setting fosters learning, innovation, and growth. In addition, these conditions encourage a diversity of ideas and talent, which strengthens organizations.

### **Reaching self-actualization**

Once the fundamental needs have been met, leaders can help team members achieve self-actualization, where their creativity and problem-solving abilities can be fully utilized to contribute to the organization's mission.

This level of engagement is facilitated by leaders who use intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. As described by Daniel Pink in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, the typical extrinsic levers of incentives and penalties can hinder engagement. However, intrinsic motivation stems from autonomy (e.g., allowing people to be self-directed), mastery (e.g., providing people with the training, tools, time, and opportunity to excel), and purpose (e.g., uniting people under a common vision of contributing to something great).

Leaders must be present on the front lines to motivate in this way. Visibility is required to learn from your team, inspire them, and put ideas into action. One-on-one check-in meetings are one of the best ways I've seen to accomplish this. These are effective because they demonstrate your availability, respect, and regard for clinicians.

## Take home message

Strengthening individual relationships and creating an environment where people can do their best work are the starting points for engagement. Remember that, as a leader, you are the catalyst for this change. So, ask yourself, "What is one thing I can do tomorrow to shape the culture of engagement in my organization?" By taking action, you can improve the culture in your clinical settings and ultimately transform the health care environment, positively impacting the organization, clinicians, and, most importantly, individual patient lives.

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