

Turn irritation into inspiration

Six ways to put physicians' perspectives to work in your practice

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Have you ever wanted to run the other way when you spotted a physician walking toward you, knowing the fellow's abrasive nature? Do you wish you knew how to harness that hostile energy?

We often shun conflict in work settings. Difficult people get our backs up because they question our assumptions and make us feel defensive about our actions and values. In return, we tell ourselves and others that "he's not a team player" so we can downgrade their advice or ignore them. Contentious professionals of any stripe may cause friction and wear others down. However, they may also convey vital information

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that can keep a practice in touch with a rapidly changing marketplace.

I offer six ways that practice administrators can bridge the gap with physicians, improve the practice environment and promote a competitive advantage.

Engage physicians in dialogue to determine clinical priorities

Include physicians in setting clinical priorities. After a successful meeting with this focus, a physician who had avoided commitments for more than 20 years because he doubted any doctor could affect administrative priorities, admitted, "I changed my behavior because I believe I am making my time count and that we are making a difference. Previously, I did not realize how often we were talking at each other rather than to each other. Through dialogue, active listening and discovery, I am dealing with some of the complexities in health care and have begun to think, work and act more interdependently than independently."¹

Implement physicians' recommendations in a timely fashion

Physicians may be skeptical of the value of attending meetings because their income depends on seeing patients. They may also believe that their input rarely influences decision-making in a timely fashion. Yet physicians can bring focus to decision-making with a fix-it-now approach, just as administrators can prevent costly errors by seeking to understand contingencies before making major judgments. Many doctors underestimate the ambiguity and complexity that group practice administrators deal with daily until physicians get involved in setting administrative priorities.

End meetings with task lists, with individual accountability for outcomes rather than processes

Most physicians have had more training in clinical judgment and outcome skills than

in process skills. They tend to regard reporting of processes as a smoke screen for lack of action.² This may spur impatient or hostile comments that make administrators believe that physicians are not interested in true collaboration.

Use a timetable showcasing progress at regular intervals, not longer than monthly

Break up a major task into a series of steps that can convey a sense of accomplishment

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and momentum. Quick wins allow people to build on successes and avoid the death of innovation via "the slow no." Physicians realize that time talking with administrators is well spent when they see progress toward a goal and resolution of problems that waste physicians' time.

Follow up to demonstrate commitment to closing the loop


For most busy practitioners, squeezed by rising expenses amid stagnant revenues, most days feel like a state of siege. Nevertheless, administrators are advised to solicit physicians' opinions, provide them feedback or convey progress in person. This approach may seem counterintuitive. Administrators — and other people in general — tend to avoid contact with those who might belittle their training and accomplishments. But physicians (and others) usually respect those who stand up to them and present solid facts.

Celebrate progress and successes often

In the sprint to check off the next task, we may forget to recognize and reward people's contributions and achievements. Celebrations can bring people together and make them feel they are integral to an organization. Accomplishing milestones, service awards, periodic retreats, new-physician orientation and employee anniversaries all represent opportunities to gather employees for positive reinforcement and improve the practice climate.³

Communication is the answer

Improved communication may not erase physicians' frustration over heavier workloads and falling reimbursement. However, both physicians and administrators share a passion for caring for patients and a desire to improve clinical outcomes that can transcend differences in outlook and training.

Many physicians look for ways to apply their knowledge, experience and energy to leave a legacy. Administrators can help them succeed — and improve the practice as a whole — by encouraging communication, depersonalizing conflict and implementing physicians' suggestions in a timely, collaborative fashion. This approach can help yield outstanding clinical outcomes, facilitate retention of productive employees and increase practice income.⁴ 

notes

1. Used with permission from Cohn KH, Allyn TR, Reid R. 2006. The challenges and opportunities of collaborating with creatively abrasive physicians. Collaborate for success!: Breakthrough Strategies for Engaging Physicians, Nurses, and Hospital Executives, by Cohn KH. Chicago: Health Administration Press:14.
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