

a VITAL WorkLife article

Organizational Retention: How to Build a Culture Optimal for Physicians

By Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW



Coming up in the article:

- A detailed explanation of what organizational culture is
- The necessary components needed to foster a positive healthcare culture
- Strategies geared towards assisting you make the most of your organization's culture

No one who administers a healthcare organization needs to be told how vital recruitment and retention of the best physicians, advanced practitioners and nurses are. Every organization wants excellent talent and the cost of staff turnover is prohibitive; it can run to \$1 million for physicians,¹ while the cost of turnover for a bedside RN ranges from \$38,000 to \$61,100.²

So the factors promoting recruitment and retention need to be top-of-mind for administrators. Some of them are obvious: compensation, for example. Experience has teased out others: manageable workloads, work-life balance, physician autonomy, opportunities for leadership development and so on.³

Given the conditions where healthcare professionals work today—complex technology, increased patient loads, the needs of organizations to increase productivity/profitability and much more—the specter of stress and burnout threatens both recruitment and retention as never before. Getting and keeping good people means engaging them and keeping them engaged, and that, in turn, means caring for their well being in a range of spheres: work load, scheduling, peer support, stress reduction and more.⁴

1. "A Review of Physician Turnover: Rates, Causes, and Consequences," Anita D. Misra-Hebert, MD et al., American Journal of Medical Quality, March 1, 2004

2. 2018 National Health Care Retention and RN Staffing Report, NSI Nursing Solutions

3. "8 Strategies to Recruit and Retain Top Physicians," Emily Rappleye, Becker's Hospital Review, July 30, 2015

4. "Physician engagement: A Multistep Approach to Improving Well-Being and Purpose" Alan H. Rosenstein, MD, PSQH, June 1, 2015



Organizational Culture—What is it?

So what do physicians themselves consider the most important factor in maintaining this well being—that is, in supporting all the values making for well being? According to the findings of the 2017 Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Survey, carried out by VITAL WorkLife and Cejka Search, it's the culture of the organization.⁴ A positive organizational culture was consistently rated even more highly than self-care tactics or business processes and procedures—important as those are—in maintaining physician well being.

Organizational culture. What is it, exactly? In a thoughtful article in the Harvard Business Review, Michael D. Watkins suggests it's not easy to define. "While there is universal agreement (1) it exists, and (2) that it plays a crucial role in shaping behavior in organizations," he writes, "there is little consensus on what organizational culture actually is."⁵

Nonetheless, Watkins offers some pithy definitions, garnered from an informal LinkedIn survey of business professionals. These include:

- "How organizations 'do things'."
- "The sum of values and rituals which serve as 'glue' to integrate the members of the organization."
- "Civilization in the workplace."

4. "Physician engagement: A Multistep Approach to Improving Well-Being and Purpose" Alan H. Rosenstein, MD, PSQH, June 1, 2015

5. Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Survey, VITAL WorkLife and Cejka Search, June 22, 2017

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Daniel J. Whitlock, MD, MBA



Honesty, Openness, Communication

Daniel J. Whitlock, MD, MBA, doesn't think culture in healthcare organizations is a complex concept. For him, "institutional glue" and "civilization in the workplace" come down to "being honest and open with people."

Dr. Whitlock, a widely experienced medical administrator and a member of the VITAL WorkLife Advisory Team, notes: "A lot of different concepts have been attached to this idea of a positive organizational culture: patient-centered focus, the showing of respect for colleagues, appropriate handling of errors—but for me the most salient one is whether there is honest and transparent communication at all levels of the organization, and especially between management and practitioners."

"If you don't have that," he says, "you may be able to recruit a good physician with a lot of bells and whistles, but you won't be able to retain her or him."



Dr. Whitlock's opinion gets heavy-duty support from a 2016 report on healthcare organization leadership and physician engagement from Athenahealth. In the Physician Engagement and Leadership Index, a survey of more than 2,000 physicians nationwide, the physicians cited good communication as the most important skill needed in medical management. Commenting on the finding, Rob Cosinuke writes, "Perhaps the most important responsibility of the healthcare leader is to define and communicate the organization's strategic vision."⁶

6. "What Is Organizational Culture? And Why Should We Care?," Michael D. Watkins, Harvard Business Review, May 15, 2013

“You’re not giving the practitioner a veto or control over the decision—simply, when the decision comes down, he or she will understand it better and feel included.”



Some Pitfalls

But Dr. Whitlock points out when it comes to retention, the focus on mission and vision needs to be augmented by an additional awareness: communication needs to be fair. One strong bone of contention for physicians, he says—and one potentially leading to dissatisfaction prompting them to “pull the ripcord” and back out of their career—is not being included in decisions affecting them directly.

“Let’s say an organization has metrics indicating they need to increase productivity,” he says. “If they unilaterally increase the number of patients a practitioner has to see daily, without consulting him or her, the physician may feel manipulated and resentful, and wonder, ‘what’s really going on in this organization?’ It’s not the kind of thinking you want to encourage in your medical staff if you want them to stay with you.”

Another key point in the Athenahealth study was the high value physicians placed on leadership in the organization; it’s a point Dr. Whitlock underlines as well in describing how good communication can work.

“When sensitive decisions are being made,” he says, “physician leaders are usually more effective than non-physicians in sitting down with docs and saying ‘certain things are being considered, and we really want to run it by you.’ You’re not giving the practitioner a veto or control over the decision—simply, when the decision comes down, he or she will understand it better and feel included.”

Download the Physician & Advanced Practitioner Well Being Solutions Survey to learn how you can help your physicians & advanced practitioners.

DOWNLOAD SURVEY

ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a national behavioral health consulting practice supporting all dimensions of well being. Our healthcare solutions are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of physicians and providers. Our team of licensed master's and doctorate level senior consultants, physician peer coaches, psychiatrists and other specialists have deep experience in issues surrounding physician performance, satisfaction and retention. Our ultimate goal is to proactively help physicians and organizations address issues before they escalate to the point of affecting performance and patient safety.



LIZ FERRON, MSW, LICSW

As our Physician Practice Lead, Liz Ferron manages Physician Well Being Resources for VITAL WorkLife, as well as oversees all solutions of our healthcare clients. Liz provides training, consultation, counseling and coaching to healthcare

administrators and individual practitioners in many areas, including stress management, change management and conflict resolution. Liz is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and received her MSW degree in clinical social work from the University of Minnesota. She was also a consultant for the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota. She has served three terms as President of the Minnesota Employee Assistance Program Administrators and Counselors (MEAPAC) and is a former adjunct faculty member at the College of St. Benedict.

Making the Most of Your Culture

If a healthcare organization is doing its best to infuse its institutional culture with these values—openness, honest communication, physician involvement and leadership—how can it leverage them to recruit?

"You can make a pact with the incoming physician—it can be a good recruiting tool," says Dr. Whitlock. "Something along the lines of 'We'll be honest with you; we won't surprise you; we'll include you in decision-making.' But then you have to really do it. This business of culture is not just something you put on a masthead; it has to permeate the whole organization. It has to be the way the organization works."

Although the cultures of many—perhaps most—organizations haven't yet been 100-percent "permeated" by these values, Dr. Whitlock believes there are good intermediate steps leaders can take on the way to the goal. "One of the best is to make sure there is some physician in the organization's hierarchy a practitioner with a problem can go to," he says. "Maybe she's going through a divorce or he's got a health issue, and they need to cut back on their schedule. They're hesitant to communicate and they're worried about the possible response. The go-to physician can advocate for them with the rest of the organization, explaining 'this isn't a bad doc; this is a doc with a problem.'"

Communication, of course, is only a part of a comprehensive orientation toward physician well being—but without a commitment to it expressed as a cultural value, the best programs will have hard going. Building a culture optimal for physicians (and thus for everyone else, including advanced practice providers, nurses, office staff and patients) takes time, patience and willingness to adapt. But if it's solid and thriving, it can be leadership's strongest ally in getting and keeping the best and brightest.

For details on how we can help you build a culture of physician well being to attract and hold, [contact us here](#).

Sources:

1. "A Review of Physician Turnover: Rates, Causes, and Consequences," Anita D. Misra-Hebert, MD et al., American Journal of Medical Quality, March 1, 2004
2. 2018 National Health Care Retention and RN Staffing Report, NSI Nursing Solutions
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5. Physician and Advanced Practitioner Well Being Survey, VITAL WorkLife and Cejka Search, June 22, 2017
6. "What Is Organizational Culture? And Why Should We Care?," Michael D. Watkins, Harvard Business Review, May 15, 2013

