



3-minute case study: Creating culture after a merger

By Erin Graham | June 6, 2017

What innovations drive success in healthcare? Here's a tactic from a high performer on the athenahealth network.

The problem

When Orthopedic Associates of Northern California merged with two other groups in less than a year, creating a unifying culture was imperative. The physicians “all came from different groups and were used to practicing a certain way,” recalls CEO Dyanna Johnson.

So Johnson identified common ground: The newly merged 12 physicians and 40 staff members all wanted to improve the patient experience. And that shared mission became the starting point for building a shared culture.

The solution

Johnson first engaged physicians by adding a standing agenda item – patient feedback – to monthly meetings. The idea was to share patients’ views of the entire care process, from the clinical

experience to home care to billing. Johnson knew that if doctors were on board with the mission, the message would trickle down to the staff.

Next came training: Staff attended courses at a local college career center to strengthen their customer service skills, and they got to know each other by role-playing for challenging encounters.

Then came processes – many of them requiring cross-team communication. Clinical teams now let the front office know when appointments run behind, so the staff can ask patients if they would prefer to reschedule. Easy tactics with big impact were added to the workflow. For example, staff began scheduling flower deliveries to the hospital rooms of every patient.

And doctors or medical assistants now call each patient following surgery, rather than waiting for the first postoperative appointment. Not only do patients appreciate the attention, Johnson says, but “a good handful [of issues] have been caught very early just by doing that.”

The outcome

By focusing on a shared commitment to the patient experience, three separate groups became a unified team. “They’re engaged,” says Johnson, “and everybody has an idea” on how to continue to improve.

And that shared culture has yielded other benefits. A high performer on key quality metrics across the athenahealth network, OANC retains patients at a higher rate than 73 percent of similar practices, and has decreased hospital readmission rates from 5 percent in 2012 to 1.2 percent by 2015.

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