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Innovative Strategies for Physician Partnerships

One health system shares the steps it took to strengthen physician engagement.

Value-based care requires healthcare organizations to engage their clinical and nonclinical leaders as partners in delivering high-quality care. To transition from the traditional model of healthcare delivery to a more patient-centric approach, health systems require a fundamentally new way of operating—one that is collaborative, proactive and receptive.

The concept of collaborative partnerships is foreign to many physicians as they have been trained to operate autonomously. To achieve successful collaboration, healthcare leaders and physicians need to work interdependently with the patient as the central focus. The shift from autonomy to partnership requires constructive conflict, learning agility, a growth mindset and acceptance of failure as a learning opportunity. Through our collective experience, we believe physician engagement and integration is best achieved through leadership training and partnership development.

One Health System's Journey

In the past, Palomar Health—the largest public healthcare district in California, serving communities in south Riverside and north San Diego Counties—grappled with a number of challenges related to physician engagement and integration. The

physicians shared no collective identity, and there was no unifying force in the form of a CMO. This presented problems when it came to driving a strategy for improved patient satisfaction because there was no structure for creating and reinforcing physician accountability.

The organization was at a crossroads. Palomar's leaders recognized the key to a turnaround was to engage its physicians as both leaders and partners with administrators to meet the organization's patient care, patient satisfaction and physician-engagement goals. Palomar embarked on a physician-integration effort based on the belief that physicians needed to drive the decision making that was in the best interest of their patients. They also needed to lead and/or be aligned with the health system's care team around quality and safety.

Engaging Physicians Through Leadership Development

In 2012, Palomar Health set a goal to integrate physicians through leadership development. Palomar Health chose leadership as a starting point because leadership builds culture.

“Having worked as a chief medical quality officer, I knew that leadership was a crucial component in creating a

culture of quality and safety,” says Duane Buringrud, MD, former chief physician leadership development officer for Palomar Health. “In fact, in a survey of patient safety practices, The Joint Commission found that leadership is the most important ingredient in transformational improvement.”

The organization decided to direct its efforts toward developing physician leaders and clinical partnerships through the creation of its physician leadership program, the Applied Academy for Physician Leaders. Palomar sought a partnership with The Leadership Development Group—a recognized leader in physician leadership development—to collaborate on the design and delivery of the program, which is grounded in a competency-based model.

The primary goals of Palomar's academy are to facilitate the development of a physician-led culture and drive collaboration and partnerships between physicians, nurses and administrators. The program was designed to include the three disciplines of a 70:20:10 model—70 percent experiential learning; 20 percent assessment and coaching; and 10 percent learning and application modules—in physician leadership development and to leverage partnerships as a driver of

improved patient satisfaction, engagement and outcomes.

A physician leadership development approach that integrates clinical and nonclinical leaders is a strategy top health systems are implementing today. Developing a program that becomes embedded in the culture of an organization and draws upon the unique challenges faced by physician leaders and healthcare executives leads to sustained engagement of staff toward the goals of enhancing quality, reducing costs and enhancing satisfaction for patients, physicians, nurses and staff.

Palomar Health cultivated physician integration through three dyad partnerships. The first paired C-suite executives with a physician executive partner. This was designed to create strategic alignment between administration and medical staff and allow physician participation in executive decision making.

The second partnership was between medical directors and unit nursing leaders; it focused on the delivery of superior care and the adoption of shared unit leadership. Third, a relationship was created between medical directors and department chairs based on the need for partnership around physician development and performance management.

The main focus of Palomar's leadership development initiative was on the partnership between the health system's medical directors and nursing leaders because of their shared responsibility in enhancing the patient experience. Even so, it was important to health system leaders that the initiative also demonstrate that the skills

required to form a dyad partnership are transferrable to other partnerships and leadership in general.

The Partnership Activation Process

A key component of Palomar Health's academy was a Partnership Activation Process, a learning-based, experiential platform that enables clinical partners to enhance their collaborative leadership skills while tackling issues on their units. The process helps partners identify solutions that provide immediate, measurable impact and organizational results.

The platform included a peer-coaching model and a Lean management approach to working on leadership skills while moving projects from concept through solution and implementation.

Academy participants gained valuable learning competencies, including:

- An understanding of how their emotional intelligence impacts others
- Knowledge of their roles as physician leaders
- Experience in establishing a clear purpose for their partnership(s)
- Enhanced skills in driving patient satisfaction and physician engagement
- Proficiency in active listening and clarifying for understanding
- The ability to demonstrate greater empathy
- An understanding of the importance of branding and communication in a change process

The Path Forward

Palomar Health's customized academy was designed to drive alignment on the system's goals, build leadership competencies and facilitate a team-based approach to caregiving. The Partnership Activation Process helped to strengthen trust, build relationships and enhance communication between physicians and their nursing partners to establish collaborative dyad partnerships, which raised the standard of care and improved the overall patient experience.

However, establishing strong dyad partnerships is only the first step. Moving forward, Palomar will further develop its leaders to become business partners and, ultimately, strategic partners who are well positioned for the future of team-based care.

The leap from business to strategy requires a partnership at the top executive level. To facilitate such a partnership, Palomar is establishing a physician role at the executive vice president level to transfer the skills learned at the dyad level to operational, strategic and financial domains and help realize the organization's aim: providing the right care at the right time in the right place. ▲

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