Embracing Change

How to Implement New Hospital Initiatives

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How does your hospital embrace change? How do you decide to engage in new programs, and how well do they work? This article will focus on 5 steps hospital leadership can leverage to gain team buy-in for new initiatives and create sustainable change.

As you begin to consider how to create and implement new hospital programs, it is helpful to understand that these plans are actually business initiatives, which represent "an organization's way of setting a priority"[1]. Priorities that are structured with clearly defined goals establish a course of action the organization takes to benefit the business. They serve as stepping stones for the organization's future direction, as part of the overall business strategy.

Developing and growing successful programs is a challenge for many hospitals. In my experiences as a business consultant, it seems that hospitals either have this skill or they don't. In reality, this is not an innate process, but one that can be learned. In order to develop this skill, hospital leaders need to understand the framework for success. There are 5 basic steps:

1. Identify a business need
2. Define the business need
3. Develop the program to address the need
4. Implement the program
5. Measure the program's outcome

Identify a Business Need

Are there problems that need solutions in your hospital? How do you know? Initiatives are often launched in response to either missed opportunities or unrealized possibilities that the hospital wants to convert into a competitive advantage. There are a couple of ways to identify what could be improved in your practice. The first is to conduct surveys of your veterinary team, asking them about daily occurrences that cause them distress or seem inefficient, such as an increase in clients that decline recommendations or those that represent an unfulfilled need, such as a way for clients to budget for pet health expenses. Client surveys are also helpful in identifying opportunities to better meet their needs. Pay particular attention to remarks about pricing, as they can be indicators that the value of the recommended service isn't being fully communicated, leaving them confused about why it is necessary or that your clients need better tools to help afford the cost of their pet's veterinary care. Finally, conducting analyses of your hospital's

financial metrics and profit centers can help illuminate areas of underperformance, such as declining adherence to dental treatment recommendations.

Define the Business Need

Harness the power of your team by asking for their perspectives about the need that has been identified by surveys and business metrics. Once you have confirmed that a necessary modification has been correctly pinpointed, refine those ideas to clearly identify the need. There are a couple of ways to jumpstart these conversations:

- **Prepare your team to discuss these ideas in a team meeting by posting a pre-meeting agenda.** Before the meeting, post an agenda describing the business need that you have identified and ask for their help in understanding why this need exists, and possible solutions. Let them know that this topic will be discussed at your meeting and they will be asked to share their insight and ideas. It is important to use words that build collaboration and partnership with your team, as shown in italics in the following example:

> **Dear XYZ Hospital Team:**
>
> In conversations with many of you, *you have shared* that you feel clients are asking for alternatives to treatment recommendations or declining the services we recommend for their pets. *We have done some investigation* and have found that our adherence rate to recommendations is less than it was at this time last year. At our staff meeting on Tuesday, *we will discuss* our findings. We are interested in hearing *why you think* this is happening? What ideas *do you have* to help pets access the care we recommend?

- **Encourage dialog, and be an active listener.** At the beginning of the meeting, define the purpose of the get-together for your team. Encourage them to discuss how the identified need impacts them. For example, "We're here to talk about the increase in declined recommendations we are experiencing and understand how it's impacting you personally and us as a team." During the meeting, it is critical that hospital leadership creates an environment that encourages dialogue by inviting others to ask questions, share emotions, experiences and insights. The hospital leaders should listen, and not offer any solutions - this is a fact finding mission that encourages your team to be involved and invested in the shared outcome of this new initiative. Each team member needs to have a seat at the table to truly buy in to the new priority.

> One great way to encourage dialog is by asking "what if?" questions. These are designed to help your team think creatively and to test the boundaries by asking questions like "What if you owned the hospital? How would you think about this?"

- **Idea Islands:** Another way to brainstorm ideas is to have each person write down as many solutions to the problem as they can on sticky pads note pads, one idea per page. Remind them that no idea is off limits-this pushes people to think boldly, and because they are writing them down they feel safer sharing their ideas. Remind your team to be respectful of each other's ideas, even if they seem unrealistic! Ask your team to break into groups, and categorize their ideas. Once done, direct them to large pieces of paper or posters on the walls or floor, where each group will create circles (i.e. "islands") for their categories, and place their ideas (post-it notes) within these islands. The final step is for the team to look at each group's

ideas. Ask them to pick out their favorites for further discussion and brainstorming.

After the brainstorming session, invite everyone to define actions that the group will take to influence how change will happen. These ideas need to come from the team, with hospital leadership facilitating the discussion. Ask questions like: "Why do you think these are happening?", "What do we control or can we influence?", "How do we want to change this?" and "What role will each of you play in making this happen?" Summarize key themes and confirm with your team that you have understood them correctly.

Develop a Program to Address the Need

As highlighted in a Harvard Business Review article[2] about getting health care employees onboard with change, the author notes "When change is imposed, active and passive resistance assures that it will never be a complete success" because employees are resentful about having the change dictated to them. As a result, engagement is absent. "But when people are aligned around shared purpose and engaged in real problem solving", they can work together to create positive outcomes much faster and more effectively. It is important to involve many people early in the process to help create this change.

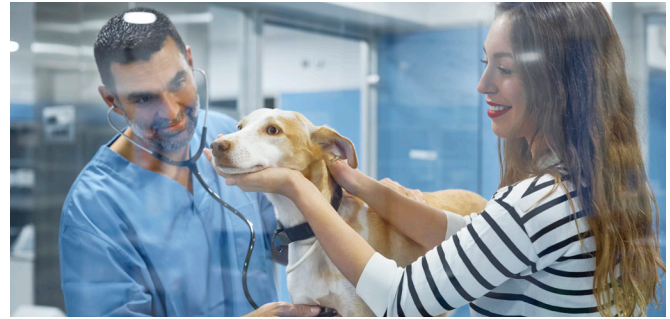This program should be easy to understand and to implement, with expectations clearly

defined. It helps to create the program using the SMART goals framework. By designing each step of the initiative by creating goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely, there is clarity around how each phase of the program will be accomplished.

Once the program framework is designed through feedback and agreed upon by team members, it is time to implement the initiative. There are four important parts to implementation:

- **Identify "champions":** Champions are team members who are particularly committed to the new program, problem solving, and to each other. They help team members identify their individual purpose within the initiative, such as helping more pets get recommended treatments. They also help connect the individual's reasons to the organization's overall priority. In this article, the priority is reducing client financial limitations.

- **Creating alignment with the program:** Each team member has a role to play in the success of the initiative. These roles have been clearly communicated and each team member accepts accountability for what they need to do to help create and maintain a successful program.

- **The business initiative needs to be "lived".** In order to create a viable program, it has to stay in the forefront of the veterinary staffs' minds. This is accomplished by incorporating the priority into the daily hospital processes so that it becomes second nature. In the example used in this article, the initiative becomes part of how essential information is communicated to clients, because the team believes that it is vital to talk with clients about the cost of care and how to prepare for those costs.

- **Team training:** Team training is a regularly scheduled and continuous process, as a

method to keep focus on the initiative. Training should include the sharing of best practices between team members, candid conversations about what difficulties they have encountered in implementing the program, how those challenges have been overcome and role playing to develop communication tools that each team member can employ. It is also helpful to incorporate stories that reinforce how the initiative aligns with hospital beliefs.

For example, if a core tenet of the hospital is helping pets receive needed care, discuss examples of how the new program helped clients provide the desired care for their beloved pets.

Measure the Outcome of the Initiative

This is a critical step, and one that is often overlooked. The initiative was designed to meet a need within the hospital, benefitting the business, veterinary team members, clients and patients. Ideally, an effective initiative is a stepping stone for the organization's future success. Program success cannot be evaluated without clearly defined objectives, including outcomes. At the beginning of the program, establish ways that you will know the program is succeeding. These should align with the business analytics and client surveys that originally identified the need for the program. Some examples include measures of increased adherence such as owners whose pets received the recommendation of dental care and received a dental treatment; percentages of pets for whom medical re-evaluation appointments were recommended and those that were kept; and the percentage of active clients that are up to date on annual physical examinations and vaccinations. As a whole, clients tend to be sensitive to changes within the culture of the practice. It is helpful

to repeat client satisfaction surveys, as well as team surveys within a defined time period. It usually takes months for an initiative to create measurable change and as many clients visit 2-3 times per year, these surveys are usually repeated on an annual basis.

Conclusion

Implementing new programs for your hospital is a critical component for continued growth and is a way to meet the needs of your pet owners and your team. When the veterinary team's perspectives are elicited and incorporated as the framework of the program, employees are more engaged in and committed to organizational success.

References

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[2]Brickman J. How to Get Health Care Employees Onboard with Change. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2016/11/how-to-get-health-care-employees-onboard-with-change. Published April 5, 2017. Accessed June 3, 2020.

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