

Physician Engagement: How Doctors Help Improvement Efforts

Take the time
to carefully
explain an issue.



By Kelly Loya, CHC, CPC-I, CPhT, CRMA

Doctor-to-doctor involvement can make change happen

The transformative landscape that is a big part of today's healthcare industry, coupled with complex reimbursement rules and emerging technologies, is a difficult environment in which to work. At the center of it all are the physicians.

“Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done.”
- Peter Drucker

As physicians go about their daily duties, they encounter patients with a wide assortment of injuries, ailments and at times terminal conditions. They must diagnose health problems of varying complexity and develop effective treatment plans. They meet with both patients and family members, sometimes with news no one wants to hear.

They also address patient and staff complaints, requirements of new regulations and administrative systems that at times do not square with the logic of clinical procedure. The hours are long and demanding, and the paperwork, reports and meetings are extensive. Sometimes it may seem that everyone is asking them for something.

They became physicians to practice medicine and help people, not fully realizing that all of the previously mentioned baggage came with it. Some physicians have the personality to embrace this pressured type of work environment and thrive. Others may seem impatient, short-tempered, uncooperative and indifferent to those of us who must interact with them concerning changing administrative and regulatory requirements of various sorts.

However, there are times when we need the engagement of physicians to ensure regulatory compliance, and to modify patient workflow and resulting charge processes. So how do you effectively engage a busy and sometimes recalcitrant physician to assist you with these administrative tasks?

Everyone has a need

An important part of effecting change is to understand how a problem affects those involved and how a solution may improve their lives. Take the time to carefully explain an issue and then present a proposed change to a physician. It gives them a better framework for understanding how it affects them, and gives them the opportunity to determine how to make the change in their everyday workflow.

For instance, some physicians want more time for their professional or personal lives. They do not want to always feel overwhelmed, behind or late. They appreciate the less complicated and simple. Some

physicians are quite concerned with being compliant. They want to know what they are doing is the right thing for their patients, themselves and the organization—that they are not violating some law or regulation in the process.

You may not know what is of greatest importance to a particular doctor. However, you can be sure that, most of the time, if a solution addresses a valid need, your efforts will be appreciated. If you can get the physician to understand why a change is necessary and that his or her collaboration will help achieve some of the physician's personal needs and goals, then you will generally be successful in gaining his or her engagement.

Physician champions

Physician champions are found in different places. They may not be the out-in-front leaders that you would think. You may find your champion by asking a somewhat resistive physician to talk with you about how a procedure is hampering them and how changing a process could work better for them.

If you can make a believer of a petulant physician by addressing his or her needs, you might find your biggest advocate. Take the time and exert the energy to help them, and the rest tends to fall into place naturally.

A case in point

An audit was completed, and it indicated major compliance concerns. The audit findings pointed to a few 'problem' physicians as being the source of the issue. Internal audit felt a reprimand from leadership would be the way to correct the behavior. However, some individuals in management were not satisfied with this approach because reprimands had

not worked in the past. There were short-term corrections, indeed, but the undesirable patterns resurfaced later in various forms.

The process workflows were carefully examined. A team was formed that included a physician champion. The team met with each 'problem' physician. These physicians seemed frustrated, and were genuinely concerned about the care of their patients. Each was spending hours every week, outside of their daily schedule, documenting patient visits and preparing for the next day. This imposed on their available time daily. Time that could have been spent with family, in most cases.

After listening to their concerns and completing a virtual walkthrough of their process, a few hours were spent shadowing their patient care workflow. Each physician was asked to complete the patient encounter as they normally did and to document their service(s). The outcome was unexpected.

The initial audit had identified an audit finding of noncompliance. However, the discussions and shadowing revealed the physicians were trying to use the system available for patient care and safety as their high priorities. The deeper dive into what was actually happening revealed a dangerous electronic health record programmed functionality that was not alerting providers to important historical patient information at the beginning of each patient encounter.

Investigation revealed the software functionality could easily be reconfigured to increase the safety of the care provided, allowing

physicians to create better work habits and making the providers' days more efficient. When the software issues were identified, with the help of the physician champion, the 'problem' physicians became engaged and were an important part of the solution design.

The additional analysis showed you cannot always jump to a conclusion about why things appear as they do. Having a physician champion on the team who understands the role can be important to communication, understanding and change. Taking time to really analyze a process with a champion and including those who appear to be having problems may reveal a new reality. That reality may have profound results for the solution to issues of noncompliance and/or inefficiency.

Summary

Most physicians are compassionate, practical and logical. They tend to resist changing processes for the sake of changing processes. They are trained in analytical thinking. They want to understand reasons for change and what will be gained from the new state of things.

Look for change opportunities that make a physician's life better, not just different. Do not be shy about asking physicians to teach you about how their processes work and what they contend with. Almost all physicians like to

teach and will take time to engage with you when you can show that their assistance will help improve their professional lives. When your effort is successful, you may be able to count on their support the next time around. **DI**

'Problem' physicians became engaged and were an important part of the solution design.



Kelly Loya is the Director of Compliance & Audit Services for Altegra Health, where she is responsible for managing all attorney/client privileged, internal audit and compliance engagements. She has extensive technical and operational experience in healthcare settings. She can be reached at (310) 776-4500 and Kelly.Loya@altegrahealth.com.

2015 AHIA 34TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Get Hip to Healthcare

**HILTON PORTLAND & EXECUTIVE TOWER
PORTLAND, OREGON
AUGUST 30 - SEPTEMBER 2, 2015**

Join us for this year's **AHIA Annual Conference in Portland, OR** – August 31-September 2, 2015. Our dynamic schedule of presenters, roundtables and subject matter categorization was designed with YOU – the healthcare internal auditing professional – in mind. At the meeting, you'll:

- **Learn** effective practices, practical ideas, and innovative solutions in sessions covering specialty/clinical quality, compliance, revenue cycle, general audit management, health plan knowledge, information technology/security and leadership
- **Connect** with vendor partners who offer a wealth of information on new products, services and solutions for your healthcare internal audit needs
- **Engage** with people just like you – attendees are chief audit executives, healthcare internal auditors, chief compliance officers/compliance professionals, healthcare consultants, privacy and security officers/professionals and medical auditors from national and international health systems, hospitals and consulting firms, large and small

The Annual Conference Planning Committee has put together an innovative program to guide you through the wide range of challenges that we all face with the changing dynamics of reform, business and technology.

"This conference not only met, but exceeded all of my expectations. The amount and quality of information that I gained will irrefutably support us in developing, implementing and maintaining better audit processes."



ahia

Assoc. of **Healthcare** Internal Auditors