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Culture is King: But Only if You Do These Three Things



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In healthcare, most of these leaders are striving for a culture of service excellence, or patient engagement, or high quality care. Many hit the mark sometimes, but not in all categories all of the time. Why?

Primarily because for many organisations, the culture just is what it is. There has been no conscious thought and planning for the desired culture. But the truth is, creating an intentional culture requires clear vision, constant vigilance and ongoing coaching, counselling and course correction. Here are three things that leaders need to do to make their culture strong:

1. Senior leaders need to define a compelling vision along with clear expectations of all leaders, making sure that competencies are in place.
2. Senior leaders must share the vision through clear communication, stating their expectations and specific standards of behaviour. This sends a message that standards are non-negotiable.
3. All leaders in the organisation need to lead in ways that are consistent with the desired culture, and serve as role models for others to emulate—coaching, mentoring, modelling and managing for the behaviours that have been defined.

Peter Drucker is credited with making the statement “culture eats strategy for breakfast” (which is often restated as “culture eats strategy for lunch”). What does it mean? It means that an organisation can spend a lot of time and effort on developing strategy, but without a strong and consistent culture, that strategy is unlikely to be achieved.

Many healthcare leaders can attest to the wisdom of this statement as they attempt to build a culture to drive desired results. It’s not easy. Where it often breaks down is at the point of standing firmly behind the service standards as “non-negotiables.” If leaders define a compelling vision for the culture, communicate the vision (along with specific behavioural expectations), but then don’t back up their stated expectations with action, the culture won’t improve. To back up these expectations in meaningful ways, leaders need to:

- Model the expected behaviours
- Positively reinforce and reward those who exhibit these behaviours (using the language of the standards)
- Constructively correct and coach those who don’t exhibit these behaviours (using the language of the standards)

Avoidance is the number one accountability killer. How often have you observed members of your organisation exhibiting behaviours that have

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been identified as non-negotiable, yet fail to do anything about it? How often have you done this in situations where others have been able to observe your inaction? What message do you think that sends about how non-negotiable these standards really are? Culture is king—but only when leaders do three things: create a compelling vision, communicate the vision, and consistently support the vision. How are you doing at that?

Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.

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