



## Health Care Organizations & Employee Engagement

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In addition to economic uncertainty that has impacted all business sectors, health care workers are under an ever increasing level of internal and external pressures that challenge their capacity. In the advent of pay for performance measures, declining reimbursement, societal emphasis on expensive technology, government mandates, and transparency, health care workers are continually asked to do more and more with less and less resources.

If you are in health care management you have probably experienced programs being delayed or abandoned all together because, “we can’t ask them to do another thing” or “I do not know how we can handle additional patient volume”. Many organizations are struggling to meet financial and patient satisfaction targets, or are in a constant state of reacting to an ever increasing list of issues rather than enhancing organizational performance.

While health care organizations may represent one of the most challenged business sectors, it also offers a largely untapped potential for enhancing organizational engagement that is unique to health care. In their book *Closing the Engagement Gap*, authors Julie Gegauer and Don Lowman of Towers Perrin, identify three connections necessary for employee engagement: Head, Heart and

Hands. These prerequisites for engagement are the same components that lead to a compassionate work environment.

As senior vice president responsible for strategic plan development, our 400 bed hospital developed an organizational strategic focus; we called it the 3C’s: Clinical and Operational Excellence, Customer Satisfaction and Compassion. Of the three, compassion offers the greatest potential for impacting organizational performance. Compassion is an attribute that is somewhat unique to health care. It is an attribute, a feeling, a state of mind that can provide something that is at the core of high-level employee engagement: Personal Fulfillment.

Unlike many business categories, health care offers the unique opportunity to truly make a difference in the lives of patients, and their families. Ask a health care worker about the times in their life that they remember most and nine times out of ten they will tell you a story about a time they experienced with a patient or a patients family. They will describe in detail, years later, the nuances of a special connection they made at a critical point in time. Health care workers have the unique opportunity to make similar connections every time they walk through the doors of the health care facility.



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The potential rewards of a compassionate exchange can be the catalyst for organizational engagement.

If the health care employee is attuned to the rewards that compassion-based patient connections can provide, the organizational goals for patient satisfaction and quality care are a natural by-product.

The experience of camaraderie, teamwork and operating at a high level of skill and capability can be a very powerful engagement factor. Again, health care is one of the few occupations where there is an almost daily opportunity to come together as a team to achieve something meaningful and in the process gain a feeling of personal fulfillment.

Despite these unique-to-health care opportunities, to achieve a higher level of organizational engagement, most health care organizations are in a state of employee avoidance. A “leave well enough alone” state of mind. Compassion and the team experience can expedite the organizational engagement for health care organizations because both factors have a direct payback for employees.

The opportunity to improve organizational performance through employee engagement cannot be ignored. Employee engagement is not a soft factor, as Towers Perrin studies have found, it has a hard dollar return-on-investment. More importantly, the upside for companies can be attained with relatively little financial investment. Improvement in many cases involves a time commitment of senior management and a commitment to improving the skill sets and communication of the management team. In the first study, Towers Perrin “correlated degree of engagement with

the financial performance of fifty companies over a one year period. They found that companies with higher engagement had nearly a 20 percent increase in operating income and nearly a 30% growth in earnings per share. Conversely, those with a low engagement saw operating income drop more than 30% “. . . that is a 50 percentage point difference in operating income between companies with higher engagement and those that have employees with lower engagement levels. Another Towers Perrin study measured companies included in the TP High Performance Engagement Index. “ This group of companies, with higher levels of engagement, generated annual shareholder returns that were 9.3 percentage points higher than the return for the S&P 500 index for the period 2002 through 2006.” The Towers Perrin studies make a compelling case that improvement of employee engagement is arguably the single most important factor for any company. A factor that can be more readily attained in challenging times like these.

Gegauer and Lowman conclude that, “No organization should risk leaving employee engagement to chance, hoping it will just happen. Its benefits, which are undeniable, are too important: consistent brand delivery, creativity, exceptional customer’s service and support, innovation and day-to-day commitment to product and process excellence.”