

Medical Staff Surveys: What Determines Physician Satisfaction?

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To say that healthcare has gone through dramatic changes during the last twenty years is an understatement. Some would say the beginning of the “revolution” in healthcare, was the introduction of Medicare reimbursement by diagnostic related groups. No longer could hospitals receive per diem type reimbursement. Hospital Administrators scurried to put in place mechanisms to review and assure that patients were discharged in a timely manner. LOS or length of stay monitoring became the metric of the moment customer service training, marketing, advertising, became “buzz words.”

Emerging from this era of increased competition and concern for financial survival, hospital administrators began to view the physicians as “customers”. Known as the gatekeepers for years, the medical staff took on a new role in healthcare that was directly linked to the hospital’s bottom line. For decades physicians were the clinical leaders in healthcare, but their new role linked the physician directly to financial reimbursement. Physicians and Administrators had to collaborate on the admission and discharge planning processes. More and more, leadership teams had to partner more closely with physicians on all aspects of care not just the clinical side of medicine, but the financial side as well. Beginning in the 80’s, the new role of physicians increased the need for Administrators to seek physician input, monitor medical staff relations, and improve communications with physicians.

In recent years, healthcare administrators have been increasingly more interested in the opinions of their medical staff. Factors such as physician involvement, communication from administration, quality of nursing care, and medical staff governance are now part of the standard annual survey process. CEOs of healthcare organizations have started to ask themselves: If physicians become dissatisfied, will they continue to use a facility as the primary site for their admissions and outpatient diagnostic services? What steps can be used to ensure that administrators know the level of physician satisfaction in the organization? How is physician satisfaction related to quality patient care, employee satisfaction and, most of all, patient satisfaction? Are physicians committed to patient safety initiatives? What are physician’s views of the health care organization’s patient safety efforts?

Recognizing the answers are not simple and finding answers to these questions must begin with gathering current data from the physicians. Using a medical staff survey, an organization can tailor inquiries to address specific organizational issues while benchmarking to a medical staff database. In order to gather useful data, efforts must occur

to analyze the organizational culture to be sure inquiries are relevant. Research reported in JAMA, The Archives of Internal Medicine, and the Journal of the American Board of Family Practice all reflect the complicated factors that lead to physician satisfaction. Definitely in physician surveying, the “one size fits all” approach is not the answer. Based on the type of healthcare organization, from a tertiary care teaching facility to a rural community hospital with 60 beds, the needs of the medical staff vary greatly.

According to research conducted by this firm and other sources, key factors that affect physicians’ satisfaction include:

1. Income / financial aspects of practice or employer
2. Relationships with other physicians, administrators, other health care professionals, and patients
3. Market Environment (e.g. medical malpractice, managed care, and governmental issues influencing the market or location where the physician practices)
4. Practice Environment (e.g. specialty area, size, type of patients, and makeup and structure of practice)
5. Autonomy

Research also indicates that physician satisfaction varies by specialty and region of the country. As one can see, a healthcare organization interfaces with a number of the key factors of physician satisfaction. For example, the market environment including managed care, competition, malpractice issues, are seemingly somewhat out of the direct influence of the healthcare organization. However, with increases in malpractice premiums many physicians look to being employed by the healthcare organization in order to be covered by their malpractice insurance. Additionally, many hospital systems own large multi-specialty medical groups to better compete in the market place and share the administrative duties involved in medical practice management.

To guide an organization through the process, external resources can assist an administrative team with gathering the most appropriate and useful information, ease of administration, analysis of data, communication of results, follow-up consulting on action planning, and database comparisons to other organizations on key factor inquiries. If an organization develops an internal survey, it is important to establish internal comparisons benchmarking to internally set standards. Whether an organization selects an external entity or decides to create their own survey, The Jackson Group recommends using the following six steps as a successful strategy for obtaining physician input:

Step One:

Assess the Organizational Culture as it relates to physicians to determine what the organization wants to learn.

- Current issues for the medical staff
- Success of Key initiatives involving physicians
- Quality of medical staff / administration relations

Step Two:

Design a Survey with Comparable Inquiries and Organization Specific Inquiries

- Potential survey inquiries may relate to physician involvement, Administration communication, medical staff relations, physician-hospital staff teamwork, medical staff leadership, patient safety, etc.

Step Three:

Activate the Survey Process

- Use efficient, convenient methodology that matches the medical staff's technology comfort level, accessibility, and ease of use
- Be sure the administrative team has medical staff leadership advocacy and support

Step Four:

Analyze the Data

- Data needs to be analyzed in a timely manner, as today's healthcare environment is rapidly changing
- Be sure everyone understands the meaning of the data as to significance, comparison throughout the organization, and to the industry database.
- Drill down to the most important outcomes for focused management attention and action planning

Step Five:

Communicate the Data

- Communicate thoroughly with full disclosure of the data while focusing attention to the most relevant findings
- Use communication methods that promote further dialogue and may even lead to more research through one to one interviews or focus groups.

Step Six:

Use the Data

- Plan follow-up action
- Meet physician's high expectations of action based on their input
- Make the medical staff a part of the action planning process by forming teams to find solutions to survey issues found in the data
- Communicate action plans and reemphasize that the plans are based on survey outcomes
- Incorporate the survey outcomes in the planning cycle of the organization
- Set clear goals addressing issues as they relate to physician service issues
- Establish a scorecard to measure key physician satisfaction metrics by department and total organization
- Hold managers / directors accountable for survey-related results and actionable items

By following these recommended survey steps, the health care organization can use the survey results to assist leaders in discovering answers to the following questions:

1. What new services should the healthcare system provide?
2. How do physicians prefer to receive communication?
3. How do physicians want to be involved?
4. What departments meet physician satisfaction for communication, response time, etc.?
5. Are there patient safety concerns in the organization related to staff, facility, or equipment?
6. How is equipment and new technology viewed by the medical staff?
7. What services are referred out of the organization's service area?

As Senior Leadership makes strategic plans, they strive to make best use of their financial resources. At the same time, they work to meet the needs of their medical staff in order to gain their support and commitment on future initiatives. Providing every day quality patient care delivered in the most effective and efficient manner while caring for the patients with courtesy and compassion are essential for success. The driving motivation for leadership in health care organizations is to retain the dedicated physicians who will operate as strategic partners in facing the many challenges of providing health care in such a volatile environment. In order to help achieve this, the best advice for a course of action is to survey physicians on a regular basis.

Today's health care market is continually evolving through use of technology, consumer driven health care, malpractice concerns, governmental involvement, and change initiated by managed care entities. The aging population continues to have a strong impact on health care as well. Only through well planned and executed surveying can health care leadership best determine where to spend their time and energy in meeting today's physician expectations.

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