The Meaning of Team

Executive Summary:
- What do you mean when you say "team"?
- Teams formed and exist for many different reasons
- The goals of a team should be clear
- Having the right team members is important if the stated goals are to be effectively achieved

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What do you mean when you say "team"? It is important to understand what someone means when she says "team" or "teamwork". After all, communication is one of the key skills of any team or team member.

Consider the following examples:

(1). Our team works very hard for our patients or clients every day.

(2). The nursing team at our outpatient clinic meets every morning to discuss insights they have to improve the safety of the care they deliver.

(3). Recently the director of our clinic formed a team to assess disruptive patient behavior and how to deal with it.

Clearly, each of the speakers has a different meaning in mind in the above scenarios. The first speaker is probably referring broadly to the collective staff of a particular site or department. The second speaker is referring to a nursing team with clearly defined members—perhaps a representative group of the nursing staff at a site—who are responsible on a daily basis of finding ways to improve the safety of care delivered at a site. The third speaker is referring to a team organized to solve a specific problem and which exists until a solution is created and reported out to the team champion or leaders of a site.

It is my intention in the rest of this newsletter to focus on the latter two situations by discussing the formation and working of effective teams.

To begin with, why should we form teams? As Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's said, "No one of us is as good as all of us." This goes against the mindset of some leaders who believe that that the solution to any and all problems at a site come from themselves. Clearly, Ray Kroc understood that this is the wrong approach to problem solving at a site.

With this in mind, teams are formed to find a solution for a problem(s) or reach a clearly stated goal. The goal or problem usually defines the term of the team and the makeup of the team. If the goal or problem to be solved is general, as in example 2 above, the team will be ongoing; that is, it will not tackle a given problem and report a solution and then disband, as in example 3 above. The team in example 2 is often referred to as continuous quality improvement team. They look for ways to improve the patient or client experience, as in safety of care. In the Toyota lean production system, which has been successfully adapted to healthcare, the focus of these improvement teams is to reduce 'waste'. This can be time a patient sits waiting for service or it can be the waste of duplicate medical tests. Infusion Associates of Grand Rapids, who I

discussed in an earlier newsletter, has ongoing teams that huddle every morning to tackle waste, which improves patient outcomes and satisfaction while enabling the staff to get more done effectively.

There are times when it is necessary to form teams to solve specific problems that come up. Recently I was reading emails from practice administrators in the MGMA Financial Management Network Member Community that focused on disruptive patient behavior and what to do about it. Wendy Steward, administrator, of Yuma Gastroenterology, stated, "We are seeing more and more aggressive patients, not to the point of threatening but aggressive and combative when given medical advice." She was looking for input from members of this community about crafting a behavior contract for patients so that they are aware that they may be dismissed from the practice for ongoing aggressiveness. Several members responded that they had seen an increase in such behavior. Some had created contracts under the advice of lawyers contracted by the practice. In such a case as this, a leader or champion would form a team to create a patient document that can be used by the site to deal with such behavior in an effective and consistent way.

Whether a team's goal is more long term or short term, certain principles are common that make teams effective. In 1965 psychologist Bruce Tuckman described the principles of effective teams and development of effective teams using the stages *forming, storming, norming* and *performing*. His work is still being using globally in many businesses and offers a good guide to effective teamwork.

Forming describes the way teams are created. Effective teams must have the right members. Teams must not only have members with the right knowledge to solve problems but must also have members with different skills in looking at problems and creating solutions. The American Society of Quality Innovation Division recognizes four key skills necessary for effective teams. Teams must have:
- *Creators*: learn from experience. They don't like boundaries.
- *Connectors*: define and solve a problem.
- *Developers*: turn abstract ideas into solutions that work.
- *Doers*: communicate solutions to others and get things implemented.

Storming describes the stage of team development where team members learn to work together. Often, new teams or new team members have difficulty working with others on their team. It is up to the team leader to develop trust among the team members so that they can devise effective solutions and can maximize their creative power.

Norming is the term used to describe the development of understanding and respect by each of the team members of the strengths and knowledge of fellow team members.

Performing is the stage a team reaches when it begins to create effective solutions to problems and challenges at a site and communicates them to the rest of the staff.

Another key ingredient of effective teams is leadership. Sometimes the key leader of a team will be a member of a team. Other times she will not; she will be a champion. Either way, the leader

is responsible for communicating the products of a team to the rest of the staff and seeing to it that solutions are effectively implemented and maintained.

As you can see, teams are formed around creating solutions to immediate problems or challenges and exist for a specific period or are formed around a general task such as designing an ever safer care delivery system and exist for long periods. The development and evolution of teams are detailed in Tuckman's forming, storming, norming and performing stages.
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Mr. Bryant is certified by the University of Michigan as a Lean Healthcare facilitator and is a member of the Medical Group Management Association.
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