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University of Texas Medical Branch: Setting a New Direction

March 2004 - Debbie Lynn Karl

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Facing rising health-care costs, declining reimbursement and low staff morale, the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston set out to undertake an across-the-board cultural transformation.

The initiative began at the top, when John D. Stobo, M.D., took office as UTMB president in 1997. He and his President's Council started by conducting an employee survey. Employees reported they were proud of UTMB's history, passionate about their work and supported changes necessary for the success of the organization. Concerns included lack of understanding of a common purpose, low morale, inconsistent quality of service and poor internal communication.

Strategies were developed to apply core values like education, service, diversity, community and innovation in creating a caring environment for patients and employees, establishing prudent financial management, maintaining institutional excellence and forming strategic partnerships.

To help employees internalize these new directions, values were incorporated into the performance appraisal system. Next, a formal training program, "Principles of Service," was developed, starting with executive management and working its way throughout the organization. Executive-level buy-in was the key to the program's success, with a member of the President's Council facilitating a portion of every session. Ultimately, 10,500 employees were trained.

It was during this period that Doug Stark, director of organizational development, training and recognition, joined the staff. Stark and his team were charged with creating a program to take "Principles of Service" to the next level, with a focus on professionalism, accountability and improving employee and customer satisfaction survey results.

Stark and AchieveGlobal Senior Account Executive Roz Laves worked collaboratively to customize the content of AchieveGlobal's "Basic Principles of a Collaborative Workplace," adding the new concepts adopted by UTMB.

The result of this collaboration was a four-hour interactive program, "Values in Professionalism" (VIP), which includes the University's core purpose, values and strategies and incorporates the five basic principles into the behavioral expectations of professionalism, teamwork, improvement, service and performance orientation.

Sessions are customized for each training group. To bring accountability to life, all participants write and verbalize actionable items detailing how they will live the values and increase their level of professionalism.

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Building upon the presidential initiative of values and professionalism, Stark and his team have created a separate leadership development curriculum to run in tandem with other employee development courses. This three-tiered program, incorporating a number of leadership modules, includes “Emerging Leader,” a succession planning program; “Supervisor Certification,” providing training in recognition, coaching, interview and selection and constructive discipline; and “Manager Certification,” for those who manage supervisors and leaders.

Although it’s difficult to isolate the results of training from what was accomplished through other campus initiatives, positive research results include:

- “Trust scores” measuring employee confidence have increased yearly from 20.2 in 1999 to 25.9 in 2002. (Scale is from a low of 8 to a high of 40.)
- Institutional turnover has decreased from 25.88 percent in 1999 to 16.76 percent in 2002.
- Overall employee satisfaction results have increased from 55 percent in 2001 to 63 percent for the first half of 2003.
- When asked what UTMB could do to encourage continued professionalism and improvement, follow-up training was the highest single response, with 27 percent.

Stark believes these initiatives were successful because training has been integrated with other strategic organizational development and recognition efforts, as well as the partnership with AchieveGlobal and the commitment and involvement on the part of the UTMB leadership.

Debbie Lynn (DL) Karl is vice president of product development for AchieveGlobal (www.achievegloab.com), international provider of skills training and consulting services. Karl was formerly director of Disney Institute Programming and manager of Disney University research and design. Send questions to dkarl@clomedia.com.

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