



Engaging the Heart in Health Care

Creating Joyful Workplaces



BY MARK
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THERE ARE MANY THINGS in today's health-care environment over which we have no control. And because of changes on the national level, it is easy to become overwhelmed. One thing we do control, however, is how we show up for work and whether or not we engage our hearts. As I work with health-care systems across the country, I find many are no longer engaging their hearts. Some have become bitter and calloused by a system in crisis. Many health-care managers tell me they are working 12 to 16 hours a day and barely feeling afloat.

Before going to work with a hospital, I do a preassessment. The most

important question I ask is, "On a scale of one to 10—with one being 'oppressively negative' and 10 being 'heavenly, couldn't be better'—how do you rate the atmosphere in your hospital?" Once in a great while I find a hospital functioning at a six, but they are mourning not being the eight they'd been used to. More often than not, though, I hear of threes and fours.

Does this ever affect patients? Of course it does. Do you think functioning at a four affects market share? Of course it does. For managers' job satisfaction and the satisfaction of those they supervise, it makes sense to put conscious effort into pushing toward the eight, nine and 10 ranges.

Joyful workplaces do not just happen.

Finding Joy

Does it make sense to you that we cannot create joyful workplaces if we cannot find our own joy? I see many

who have lost touch with their joy. I believe it vital to survival to stay connected to our joy and to savor the joy and laughter in our life and in our work. I speak all over the country about the healing power of laughter. Laughter is a powerful form of compassion.

Step No. 1 in creating joyful workplaces is finding ways to reconnect with your own joy. Remind yourself to laugh, to take a deep breath, to smile, to look deeply into someone's eyes or to feel a connection with a patient or an employee.

Compassion is the great healer and laughter can be a form of compassion. Compassionate humor is very different from sarcastic humor or humor that puts people down. I love the Dilbert cartoon where the boss is telling the employees he has decided to use humor in the workplace because experts say that humor helps to ease tension, which is important in times when the workforce is being trimmed. The next panel shows the boss saying to employees "knock,

knock,” hearing them answer “Who’s there?” and replying “Not you anymore.”

That cartoon shows clearly how not to do compassionate humor.

I often will ask a group of 100 managers, “How many of you think you are funny?” I get three or four hands in the air. That is so untrue. All of us are funny, just not always on purpose. I guarantee that if someone wears a funny nose, they will be funny. People will laugh and that person will bring joy into the world. I wear a ridiculous fish hat many places in the world, but in no place do people laugh harder than in hospitals. Hospitals can be sad places. Patients and their families are often depressed and vulnerable. I watch these sad faces turn to smiles. Even if it is just for a few moments, they have reconnected to their joy.

Hospitals are not just sad places for patients, but often for staff members and managers caught up in seemingly endless reorganizations and cost cutting and always having to do more with less. We all must find ways to stay connected to our joy if we are going to create joyful workplaces. I wish it were as simple as donning a funny nose or hat. Don’t get me wrong, I believe noses and hats can bring us back to the natural sense of our own “funniness” and can help us manage stress. I never like to be too far from my banana nose or my fish hat. It is amazing how often, when I put them on, they take away the sense of emergency that I often give to situations and events—circumstances which when I can take a step back are not actually emergencies. When we or the people we supervise turn every event into an emergency, we are on the spiral downward to stress, unhappiness, anxiety and depression.

Developing Compassion

At a deeper level, we need to be working toward developing our senses of compassion, both for patients and those we supervise. If we want to instill the idea that “by treating a person instead of a disease we always win,” we need to see employees not just for their functions, but as human beings. That involves giving people lots of appreciation, so they feel valued.

How much time do you spend writing notes to employees to let them know how much you value what they do and who they are? Be honest. How often do we say, “I noticed how you treated that patient. It made me so proud to work with you.” The simple truth is that line-staff members will treat patients and families only as well as they feel treated. Step 2 is to offer lots of appreciation to those who work for you. Be outrageous in the lengths you will go to show appreciation.

Establishing Rapport

Step 3 is to insist on kindness toward patients and their families to make clear your expectation of human as well as technical competence in your employees. When I taught at the University of Hawaii’s medical school, I taught rapport skills to physicians. Caregivers who have rapport with patients get a better medical history on which to base a treatment plan. They also get greater medical compliance. Medical noncompliance is a serious problem. Literature reviews show 33 percent of patients are medically noncompliant.¹ Some researchers say we should teach doctors to act so they can at least pretend to be concerned about patients’ health,² but it has been proven that physicians can be taught rapport skills.³

Rapport means making a connection. Once when my wife was hospitalized, a phlebotomist came into the hospital room to draw blood. She never looked at my wife, never called her by name. She simply turned my wife’s arm to make sure the name on the band corresponded to the name on the order. She drew the blood and was gone. It was clear that my wife was “arm number 62.” Have you ever felt like just another body part in your experience as a patient? We always feel diminished. The phlebotomist was competent in the technical part, but somehow no one had pointed out the expectation and importance of connection. We assume everyone knows what excellence looks like, but they often do not. It is up to managers to set expectations.

During a battle with prostate cancer, one writer said, “I wish the physician would talk to my spirit as well as my

prostate. What would please me most would be to have a doctor who enjoyed me, who spoke to me with a voice that conveyed his humanity.”⁴

There may not actually be a lack of compassion—sometimes it is simply a lack of thinking. My sister recently underwent a bone-marrow transplant. It has been a very difficult time because no other treatment was effective. In preparation for the transplant, she went to have a pheresis line and two central lines implanted. The woman doing the preparation asked her what kind of cancer she had. My sister said, “Hodgkin’s.” The woman said, “Oh, you are so lucky.” But after a year of failed chemotherapy, facing a transplant that yielded only a 50-percent rate of success and could itself be fatal, my sister was not feeling lucky. She said it took great control not to throttle the woman.

Step 1:

Reconnect with your own individual joy

Remind yourself to laugh. To take a deep breath. To smile. To look deeply into someone’s eyes. To make a connection with a patient or an employee.

People do not sue about “important” things like operating on the wrong kidney. Rather, it is the patients who have been treated abruptly who look for ways to get even.⁵ It is the patients who have been depersonalized and whose feelings have been hurt who sue. Patients seldom sue those who have cared for them with kindness.

Celebrate

Step 4 in creating joyful workplaces is celebrating the customer service heroes in an organization, those people who dazzle and delight customers. Have new hires shadow the best employees. The best employees will feel valued and the new employees will learn how to treat others. Begin each staff meeting by sharing >>

>> **Joyful Workplaces**, from page 17 “connecting moments.” Connecting moments do not have to be dramatic. They are ordinary moments turned extraordinary by simple compassion.

After addressing a large nursing conference in Milwaukee, a woman came up to me and affirmed that people do not sue those who have treated them with kindness. She told me her father had died in the past year in a Milwaukee hospital. As a nurse, she knew there had been some serious mistakes made in his care, but when she went to talk to her mother about it, her mother’s response was, “Oh no, dear. They were so nice to us.”

What her mother remembered was the man who was pushed the gurney on which her husband was being transported to a surgery that he would ultimately not survive. This small lady tried to reach over the gurney bars to kiss her husband. The orderly stopped the gurney and said, “Hold on. Let me put down the rails so you can give him a good smooch.” He did, and it was their last kiss. Had the gurney driver thought his job was only to drive the gurney,

the hospital probably would have been open to a lawsuit.

Step 2:

Offer appreciation to those who work for you

See employees as human beings. Write notes to let them know their value. Be outrageous in the lengths traveled to show compassion.

More importantly, the woman would have been denied a very special memory.

It is not just what we do, but how we do it that makes such a difference in people’s lives. If I am going in for surgery, I want a surgeon who has great technical skills. But I once heard someone say there is a world of difference between highly skilled surgery and highly skilled surgery with thoughtfulness. People will always notice the difference.

Employees can share their own connecting moments or those of their co-workers. Once you put the expectation out to your department, people will begin to pay attention to what is good about themselves and their co-workers. Place descriptions of connecting moments into personnel files and send a copy to the person with a “Way to go!” message. No matter what the job title, everyone has opportunity to dazzle and delight the customer, to turn ordinary moments into connecting moments.

As managers, you are the lead dazzlers. Model that kind of compassion in the way you treat those who work for you. Notice the little things. Managers sometimes get buried in offices under all the work on their desks. Make time to manage by walking around. It is hard to notice and appreciate staff members when you are stuck in your office. Always be on the lookout for the everyday greatness of the everyday heroes in your department.

Together you and your staff can create a vision of what a joyful workplace should look like. Make sure the vision is not just filled with fancy words and notions, but with concrete behaviors you can evaluate. “Be nice to patients” cannot be evaluated. But “Greet patients with a smile, shake their hands and call them by name when appropriate” can be.

Step 3:

Demand human competence as well as technical skill

Establish rapport with patients and their families. Insist on employee kindness in all interpersonal dealings.

Smile

Something as simple as smiling has become a lost art in health care. As I walk through hospitals, I do not see people smiling at each other. I see them looking down at papers or in a hurry to get to the next meeting. Another thing I sometimes do before

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“It is hard to notice and appreciate staff members when you are stuck in your office. Always be on the lookout for the everyday greatness of the everyday heroes in your department.”

working with a hospital is a site visit where I pretend to be lost. I count the number of staff members who walk by me without noticing. Sometimes I get as high as 80 before someone inquires. For too many hospital staff members, it seems, lost patients are “not my job.”

Unhappy people are unlikely to smile at others. A smile will come naturally when a person feels appreciated and connected to their joy. For others, it's important to make the expectation very clear. In high school my daughter came home from a student council training session saying, “Dad, they taught us to smile at the invisible kids in the school.” There are invisible kids in every high school. There are lonely people who don't quite fit in, perhaps even in your department. A simple smile can be reassuring. Most of us probably do not smile enough, and we also know people whom I call the “perpetually serious.” They always walk around with a scowl. Not exactly the way to “dazzle and delight” customers.

People are often unaware how they look. They may need you to point it out in a kind way.

Many years ago, I was doing a seminar for nurses. There was a woman in the fourth row who sat with a scowl on her face for the first two hours of an all-day seminar on the power of laughter in health care. She never smiled, never laughed. It was unnerving to me as a speaker to see this woman appearing so miserable. I tried to focus on a smiling

Step 4:
Celebrate your customer service heroes
Place new hires with the best employees. Share your staff's tales of “connecting moments.” Establish and expect a standard of excellence in employee behavior.

person on either side of her, but as I moved from one side to the other, there she was. My only consolation was that I knew at the break she would be out the door in a flash and would not complete the day. I was wrong. At

the break, she walked up to the podium and said, “I just wanted you to know that this is the best seminar I have ever attended.” I wanted to say, “Lady, tell your face.”

I think it would be a good idea for all of us, before walking into the hospital, to “tell our face.” Before seeing a patient, “tell your face.” Smiling is a powerful form of recognition.

Connect To Joy

Engage your heart and everyone wins. Patients and their families >>

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feel the compassion. You and your employees get to be human and feel valued and appreciated. Staying connected to joy keeps us connected to our compassion and our humanity. Joy is possible when we engage our hearts as well as our hands and heads. A joyful workplace rarely just happens. It

all starts with our decision to make the workplace joyful. ■

About the Author

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At IHCA's 57th Annual Convention and Trade Show, Mark will discuss how to create workplaces where people want to be rather than have to be during Oventions: A Celebration of Long-Term Care Nurses from 7:30-9:30 a.m., Wednesday, Sept. 19.

¹ B.Hulka et al, "Communication, Compliance and Concordance between Physicians and Patients with Prescribed Medications," American Journal of Public Health 66 (September 1976) 847-853; M.V. Marston, "Compliance with Medical Regimens: A Review of the Literature," Nursing Research 19 (July/August 1970) 312-322.
² H.M. Finestone, D.B. Conter, "Acting in Medical Practice," (Viewpoint) The Lancet 344 (Sept. 17, 1994) 801-802.
³ V.K. Fine, M.E. Therrien, "Empathy in the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Skill Training for Medical Students," Journal of Medical Education 52 (September 1977) 752-757.
⁴ A. Broyard, "Doctor Talk to Me," New York Times, 26 August, 1990, sec 6, 33.
⁵ F.F. Jacques, Verdict Pending: A Patient Representative's Intervention (Garden Grove, Calif: Capistrano Press, 1983).
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