

Communication as a catalyst

Communicative means may be used actively to support progress and accelerate improvement work. Communication, both internally in the organisation and externally towards the media and the general public, may be used strategically to generate attention, focus, and will for change. The purpose of communication is not only to display and disseminate knowledge, but also very much to create motivation among healthcare professionals, thereby acting as a catalyst for the improvement work.

An active communication strategy may be used in different ways to stimulate the commitment to improvement work.

First of all, it is useful to highlight the successes achieved by improvement work. Milestones can be celebrated locally in departments or by the organisation as a whole, and good results can be reported via internal media and to the local or national press.

Experience from improvement programmes shows that celebrations and positive media coverage are perceived by staff as recognition of their efforts, thereby stimulating their motivation and commitment.

Another part of an active communication strategy deals with creating visibility of the current status of quality and patient safety. Full openness and transparency about clinical outcomes, complications, adverse events, and service deficiencies, as well as openness about the goals

for which the organisation strives, is considered to be a highly effective tool for improvement work by international hospital management experts.

Going naked

When you “go naked” you expose yourself. For example, as an executive of an organisation you have the courage to say, “Last month six of our patients suffered an unexpected cardiac arrest during their admission. Our goal is to reduce the occurrence of unexpected cardiac arrests to half of that number within the coming year. We know from the best in the field of patient safety that this can be achieved.”

When you become aware of the gap between the current quality status and the ambitious goals, commitment and willingness to improve will develop in the organisation.

Transparency is used both internally at the departmental and organisational level and externally towards the general public, the press, patients, and their families. When the need for improvements receives attention, this has a number of effects on motivation and commitment. When executives asks for transparency, it signals high management priority for this area. Furthermore, deficiencies in quality and patient safety become visible, which challenges the pride of executives and staff alike. When a department gives an update each day of the number of days passed since the last time a patient suffered a pressure ulcer, this automatically

enhances the motivation to continue improving processes for pressure ulcer prevention.

Going public with your current data – also the not so good data – and at the same time presenting your more ambitious goals, contributes further to a dynamic improvement work. Openness towards the general public sends a signal that the organisation takes problems seriously and is working to generate improvements. At the same time, a pressure of expectations on the organization from the outside is created. If you go naked, it is nice to be buff. If you have stated that you want to remove pressure ulcers before New Year, you had better put those words into action.

Using communication as an instrument

The most effective way to create commitment is by communicating about feelings as well as common sense. Data may be made relevant by using absolute figures instead of rates or percentages. Put briefly, you could remove the denominator from the fraction.

Putting a face on data in the form of specific patient stories may also do this. These could be success stories that the organisation can learn from, or examples of unfortunate patient admissions, harm, complications, errors in communication, etc. Numbers and data may not make an impression; things are quite different, when we are talking about a specific person. ■