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## Involve Physicians in Strategic Planning

*Effective physician participation strengthens strategy formulation, implementation.*

Physician participation is key to successful strategic planning. Physicians offer a unique perspective on an organization and its environment. Their input can help identify key goals and formulate strategies to achieve those goals. And, when physicians are involved in a productive way, their guidance can be indispensable to the successful implementation of a plan.

### Structuring the Strategic Planning Process

Aspirus, a community-based, non-profit healthcare system serving north central Wisconsin, includes a tertiary hospital, two critical care hospitals, several primary care clinics, a nursing home and hospice, and home health services. In 2006 the organization hired a new CEO and experienced additional competition for the first time in 30 years when a new hospital was built in the area. The CEO believed it was important to develop a common vision and create a strategic plan to ensure the success of the organization even with its increased competition. To initiate the process, approximately 90 community leaders—including 50 physicians who provided more information about the market—were individually involved in the process of

developing the organization's future. Information from a previous medical staff survey was used as a starting point.

*Physician involvement can result in a more meaningful and productive planning process when physicians are an essential element of developing, implementing and promoting the strategic plan.*

The strategic planning process was led through internal resources and supported by an outside facilitator. Additionally, careful attention was given to how to involve physicians in the planning process because of a 2006 medical staff survey that found the administration's "willingness to involve physicians in strategic decisions" has the greatest influence on physicians' perception of administration. Efforts to involve physicians in the process included:

1. Structuring the strategic planning committee to include six physicians, eight lay board members and four members of senior management.

2. Involving physicians in the annual strategic planning retreat and making educational presentations, along with board members and planning committee members.

3. Conducting meetings between the CEO and senior vice president, Business Development and each of the clinics and independent physician groups associated with Aspirus. These meetings, held in the physicians' offices, were used to describe the organization's overall strategic direction, answer questions and get input on specific goals and implementation. Physician input tended to be tactical and specific to the individual practice and provided guidance on implementation.

4. Presenting and soliciting comments and questions about the medical staff survey, which was coordinated by the vice president of Medical Affairs.

### Feedback and Results

During the planning process, it was important to meet with individuals and with each physician group to gain the proper perspective for the

organization. This helped achieve consensus, revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the system and helped identify important issues and provide guidance on how best to achieve a unified vision.

Participant comments and a structured evaluation following the retreat provided feedback about the strategic planning process. In addition, the medical staff perception study was repeated in 2007. Individual comments and the evaluation results were nearly universally positive. Feedback from sources was incorporated into the strategic planning update process.

The survey also showed significant improvements in physician perceptions in all clinical areas. Also, the percentile ranking of Aspirus' administration as "excellent" increased. The results, however, for specific attributes of administration were mixed. For instance, the rating on "timeliness of communication" decreased slightly, while the rating for "responsiveness to physicians' concerns" increased. To address this communication issue a weekly e-newsletter was sent to the medical staff, and an electronic information board was placed in the physicians' lounge to provide updated information.

As a result, Aspirus updated the vision to be recognized as the area's healthcare system of choice and one that delivers value, innovation, excellence and compassion. The goal was to focus on value, quality and costs through working with physicians. And through these efforts, two new clinics are under construction, a critical access hospital was added to the

system and a helicopter program was initiated.

### **Strengthening the Strategic Planning Process**

By involving physicians in strategic planning, the organization realized that it was able to make improvements in all its functional areas, which include the following five points:

1. There are different, and important, roles for physicians in the strategic planning process. Within reason, greater physician participation enriches the planning process.
2. Don't expect one physician in the group to represent several others in the group. Physicians reserve the right to be heard as individuals, and if they perceive that right as being ignored, it becomes more difficult to get their buy-in.
3. Keep your commitments. Failing to honor a comment such as "I'll get back to you on that" can lead to trouble.
4. There is no substitute for face-to-face communication. Electronic communication is fast and indispensable but impersonal. Meeting face-to-face emphasizes both the importance of the topic—in this case strategic planning—and the people involved in dialog—the physicians.
5. Perceptions change slowly, especially going upward. Some positive changes in behavior

or process are not recognized immediately and may not be for a long time.

Continuous improvement is a hallmark of outstanding organizations. Physician involvement can result in a more meaningful and productive planning process when physicians are an essential element of developing, implementing and promoting the strategic plan. ▲

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