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How to strengthen your practice's team culture



You diagnose a patient before you determine treatment, but have you ever diagnosed your practice's team culture? The way your practice works and what your team members value can determine your practice's success—or failure—in the ever-changing health care environment.

Your practice culture is the set of underlying rules and beliefs, usually unrecognized, that determine how everyone in your practice interacts with each other and with patients. New team members gradually absorb the practice's culture without being taught and often without noticing.

Successful team cultures have integrated teams that learn continuously, engage patients, communicate well and listen to one another. It is possible to transform your culture into one that will thrive in today's care environment, and a [free online module](#) in the AMA's [STEPS Forward collection](#) shows you how.

Visit the module to get an in-depth look at strategies you can use—but first, read this:

1. Diagnose the current state of your team culture.

Use surveys to gauge the health of your team culture (links to surveys are in the module). Make it clear the surveys will be used to improve the practice and will be anonymous.

2. Discuss the results and brainstorm improvements.

This can be as simple as asking people what results they think the group should work on or what they can do to improve in those areas. The module outlines how to encourage and facilitate a team brainstorming session.

3. Create a staff compact as a group.

This is a written document that details how staff should treat each other. Everyone in the practice should contribute, because the process of creating the compact can be more important than the final product. Get a sample staff compact and ideas for how to start the process in the module.

4. Create opportunities for team communication throughout the day.

Seating team members near each other, also called co-location, morning huddles, end-of-day debriefs and weekly team meetings can all strengthen working relationships and build team culture. The module includes a variety of ways to encourage multiple, brief conversations throughout the day.

5. Meet regularly.

Regular team meetings will make a huge difference in culture. Meetings should be scheduled, and agendas should be in hand in advance. Find ideas on how to conduct meetings and what to cover in the module, or use another [STEPS Forward module](#) for even more ways to improve meetings.

6. Focus on individual development.

Be mindful of creating opportunities for staff to take on new responsibilities. Be flexible in helping staff take courses and get education. This sends a powerful message about your practice's values.

7. Get to know your team members.

This is a simple way to strengthen team culture. For example, celebrate birthdays and work anniversaries. Eat lunch together. The module offers additional ideas as well.

8. Teach leaders to be mentors, not managers.

Successful team cultures promote leadership that emphasizes teaching and mentoring over traditional management structures. As a physician, you use leadership and coaching daily through communicating with and teaching patients, so strive to use those skills in team interactions as well. The module includes more information about effective leaders.

9. Create an environment that supports continual learning.

Constantly identifying new opportunities for improvement shows the team that the practice is nimble and ready for whatever's next in today's changing health care environment. Use [Lean](#) and [implementing change](#) STEPS Forward modules for tools to guide you in creating an environment of learning and improvement.

10. Engage patients.

Physicians are often too close to the work to experience health care as patients do. Ask patients to share feedback, and let them know it will help you build a stronger practice. The module offers effective ways to solicit this feedback.

Many more details on this process can be found in the module, including stories from real-life physicians. The module also includes information about how to get support for intervention implementation, and it offers continuing medical education credit.

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