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HEALTH CARE
IMPROVEMENT
PROJECT

Health Workforce Activity: Engaging Health Workers to Improve Performance, Productivity, and Retention

Background

The scarce and ill-prepared health workforce has become one of the major global challenges in health care. Qualified health care workers are in short supply and demand is high. Because they work for low wages and in harsh conditions, these workers often become demoralized, and as a result, either leave their positions in search of something easier or more profitable or do less at work. Traditional approaches to motivating and retaining health workers, such as paying slightly higher salaries or providing occasional training, have failed to close these motivational gaps. Around the world, health care delivery organizations have struggled to identify causes and implement solutions to sub-par performance, low motivation, and high turnover.

Recently, however, the concept of ‘engaging’ employees in the design, management, and results of their work offers a new way of thinking about managing employees. Extensive research conducted in the U.S. and other developed countries about service industries and client-facing roles has shown that if a person is “engaged” in his or her job, the productivity of the organization improves significantly,¹ and he or she performs far better.

In the health care industry, research conducted by Gallup and other organizations in more than 334 business units in health care facilities and 13, 675 health care workers in developed countries shows that increased engagement among nurses results in increased patient satisfaction, better nurse retention and higher morale, lower avoidable mortality and complication rates, improved clinical measures such as reduced infections and reduced medication errors.²

Employee Engagement is:

“The extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it.”

“The extent to which employees put discretionary effort into their work in the form of brainpower, extra time, and energy.”

What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

HCI is testing the use of employee engagement concepts in USAID-assisted countries to measure and improve health worker performance, productivity, and retention.

HCI Approach

The HCI Project has adapted Gallup’s and other organizations’ employee engagement questionnaires to create a 26-item instrument that is appropriate to the environment of international public health in resource poor countries (see box on next page). The questionnaire is explained and discussed in groups of similar types of health workers (literate, non-literate, administrative) and workers then complete the questionnaire individually and confidentially. Once the data is analyzed, teams of workers meet with supervisors to discuss scores and implement improvements at the local level. Engagement is measured again in three to four months and results are most compared and discussed. This improvement cycle enables health workers to focus on issues that affect them most.

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The USAID Health Care Improvement (HCI) Project seeks to develop the capacity of host country health systems to apply modern quality improvement approaches to improve health worker capacity, motivation, and retention. The work of the HCI Project is supported by the American people through the United States Agency for International Development under the terms of Contract No. GHN-I-01-07-00003-00. The contractor team for the HCI Project includes prime contractor University Research Co., LLC, EnCompass LLC, Family Health International, Initiatives Inc., Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs, and Management Systems International. Initiatives is HCI’s lead partner in the area of workforce development. For more information, please contact Ms. Lauren Crigler, HCI Director of Workforce Development, at lcrigler@urc-chs.com, or visit www.hciproject.org.

Program Status

HCI is working to improve employee engagement in several countries:

- In Niger, as part of a human resources management improvement collaborative, 16 quality improvement teams are using data from the employee engagement questionnaire to focus solutions on areas that are of most concern to health workers, including the clarity of their roles, opportunities for career advancement, and fair evaluation and reward for good performance.
- In Nicaragua, three Mission-funded improvement collaboratives (addressing maternal-neonatal, family planning, and HIV services) are integrating employee engagement into ongoing QI work.
- In Bangladesh, HCI will work with a local NGO to conduct an assessment of employee engagement in one hospital.
- In Ethiopia, HCI has adapted the engagement instrument for the community level and is measuring the engagement of community volunteers delivering services for orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV as part of a baseline assessment.

Measuring Health Worker Engagement

HCI's Health Worker Engagement Assessment instrument assesses each of the following 26 items that define the six key drivers of employee engagement. The questionnaire uses a five-point agreement rating scale that ranges from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

1. Belief in job and organization

- I believe that what I do at work is important.
- I have had a conversation with my supervisor or my colleagues about the specific tasks I am expected to do at work.
- People at work understand that what I do is important.
- This facility has a good reputation in the community.

2. Belief in ability to succeed

- I have the knowledge and skills to meet the expectations placed on me.
- When I have questions about my job I am sometimes afraid to ask for help.
- I have the materials and supplies I need to do my job well.
- When a difficult situation at work arises, I am confident that I can solve it.

3. Relations with my colleagues and my supervisor

- I work closely with my colleagues to solve problems.
- My supervisor knows when I work hard.
- I have a close friend at work with whom I can share my ideas or problems.
- It would be difficult for me to say something that my supervisor or hospital director might disagree with.

4. Professional Advancement

- In the past 12 months, someone has talked to me at work about my career.
- I have enough opportunities to learn and grow in my profession.
- I know what I need to do to advance in my career.
- I am evaluated fairly for my work.
- I believe I will advance in my career if I do good work.

5. Support and recognition

- My colleagues praise me when I do a good job.
- My colleagues openly listen to my opinions and ideas.
- This facility cares about my safety on the job.
- My supervisor frequently talks to me about the quality of my work.
- People who perform their jobs well at the facility generally get rewarded for it.

6. Influence in decision making

- Suggestions made by health workers on how to improve the work are usually ignored.
- I participate in decisions about how we do things in this facility.
- I have the freedom to make changes in the way I do my work.
- I don't really like to make decisions on my own because I am afraid of the consequences if I am wrong.

¹ Wellins RS, Bernthal P, and Phelps M. 2007. Employee Engagement: The Key to Realizing Competitive Advantage. Development Dimensions International, Inc. Available at www.ddiworld.com.

² Harter JK, Schmidt FL, and Hayes TL. 2002. Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol 87(2), Apr 2002, 268-279.