

The Power of Collaboration

By Irene Richardson, CEO, Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County

When everyone works together toward a common goal, great things happen.

There is a classic Aesop's fable that offers a great lesson about how teamwork and collaboration make teams stronger:

A father whose sons were always fighting wanted to show them the value of the synergy that comes from working together. So, he had one of the sons bring him a bundle of sticks. He gathered his sons around him, and one at a time, he asked each young man to take the bundle of sticks and try to break it. None succeeded. He then split open the bundle, and handed each son one or two sticks, asking them once again to try to break them. This time, the sons did so easily. "You see boys," he said. "Individually, these sticks do not have much strength, but when you combine their individual might, they form something of much greater power. Separately, you can be broken, but together, you are stronger."

This ageless fable carries a solid message about the synergy that comes from teamwork. When goals are aligned and everyone is working collaboratively, everyone wins. As hospitals and health systems face financial woes, workforce shortages, and regulatory pressures, now is the time for boards and administration to align themselves with common goals and work in synergy to accomplish them. For example, our board and administration collaborate to set goals that are in alignment with our strategic plan, such as goals related to finance, process improvement, patient safety and quality, and patient and employee satisfaction.

Working collaboratively is one of our values at Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County. Our person-centered care culture helps us remain steadfast in our mission, "Compassionate care for every life we touch." We offer care and interaction with our patients, their families, our staff, our community, and

our visitors with kindness and compassion. We are a small standalone public hospital in rural Southwest Wyoming that serves a population of 42,000 people in a 10,000-square-foot radius. Our mission, along with our focus on person-centered care, has been the driving force for our success.

Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County navigated our community through the pandemic and continues to remain stronger and better than ever. Our success can be attributed to our anticipatory intelligence and our leadership team's ability to work together to adapt and change course with the challenges all hospitals faced. Our constant communication and collaboration allowed us to quickly set up drive-thru swabbing stations, vaccine clinics, and create a walk-in clinic. Under the guidance and direction of our board, we became the trusted healthcare leader of our community, and staff and physicians remained resilient and persevered through some very trying times. We treated our patients and community and led the way in managing the pandemic in a small, rural community.

One of the ways our board and administration work collaboratively is by sharing a common understanding of the need to focus on our healthcare workers in order to ensure our ability to deliver care now and in the future. "Workplace experience" is one of our strategic pillars and the leadership team is focused on ensuring our employees have a positive, supportive workplace. At the onset of the pandemic and even post-pandemic, hospitals and health systems continue to face financially dire strains and must make difficult decisions to keep their doors open. Even though our hospital faced economic pressures, our board and administration have demonstrated unwavering support for our staff by refraining from layoffs before, during, and post-pandemic. This year our executive team even revamped our wage scale to offer more competitive wages, which reduced overall turnover from 23 to 19 percent. The board and management recognize that our employees are our greatest asset.

Leadership also invests in staff by supporting professional growth, development, and well-being. We encourage our staff to continue their education through our tuition reimbursement program and to attend conferences and in-house and online education. We started "Wellness Wednesdays" where every Wednesday we invite our staff to the front lobby to share creative ideas for keeping healthy. Staff safety has also become increasingly important. We implemented our Just Culture program, which

focuses on ensuring employees feel safe reporting any incidents. Our leadership team also conducts rounds to ensure staff have what they need to do their jobs. Leadership collaborating with staff is key to ensuring our hospital is running efficiently and providing high-quality care.

Our leadership team is also in agreement on the importance of offering high-value services in our community. Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County provides a vast array of services so patients can enjoy excellent, quality healthcare close to home. The services we provide are essential to meet the healthcare needs of our community. Due to our rural location, we wanted to ensure our patients could continue to access all the services we offer, and the board made the decision not to reduce or eliminate services during and post-pandemic. Our board truly exemplifies our mission and ensures that the needs of our patients and community are met, while continuing to support our workforce.

Additionally, our hospital is a standalone, prospective payment hospital. Our stakeholders are our patients, staff, and community. The effective governance the board has provided has allowed us to reinvest our cash flow from operations back into our hospital by purchasing state-of-the-art equipment, making continuous maintenance and building upgrades, investing in our staff, and maintaining and growing the services we offer to our patients and community. The board carefully prioritizes its initiatives and is guided by our mission and person-centered care culture.

→ Key Board Takeaways

As hospitals and health systems continue to face post-pandemic challenges, they should ensure that the board and management are working collaboratively to:

- Revisit strategic plans, set goals and priorities, and ensure leadership is aligned and working in synergy to accomplish objectives.
- Be ready to adapt and work together to change course if needed.
- Prioritize the workforce; all should agree that fostering a supportive environment for staff is key to providing high-quality healthcare.
- Stay true to your mission—this is the leadership team’s common north star.

Our mission and culture align our leadership team on the importance of the patient experience. The board receives regular reports from management, reviews key metrics, and supports leadership and the medical staff in improving patient satisfaction scores. This year, we improved in seven of eight domains on the patient satisfaction surveys. We did this through our focus on increased communication, patient and staff rounding, and an initiative we call “commit to sit” where staff and physicians sit down while talking with patients and families. Our case management team ensures safe and timely discharges of our patients and coordinates post-acute care, such as follow-up visits with primary care providers and ensuring that they have their medications and are taking them properly.

Our board members are also in alignment on the need for continuous education so they can perform at their best. Our partnership with The Governance Institute has been a most valuable relationship for our board and administration with its informative Webinars, leadership conferences, publications, advisors, tools, and resources. This collaboration has assisted our board and administration in their commitment to advancing healthcare in our rural community.

The lessons above teach us that when teams work together they become aligned, stronger, and can achieve great things. We are proud of all we have accomplished and will continue to work together as a collaborative team to lead our organization in providing high-quality, compassionate care for our community.

The Governance Institute thanks Irene Richardson, CEO, Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County, for contributing this article. She can be reached at irichardson@sweetwatermemorial.com.

