Local Board Focus

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Getting Strategic About Accountability for the Patient Experience

By Toya Gorley, Improvement Advisor, *NRC Health*

It usually doesn't take long before accountability comes up in discussions with healthcare leaders, most often in the form of a lament: "We need more accountability" or "We don't have a sense of shared responsibility." A sense of personal accountability and mutual responsibility helps sustain workplace cultures that strive for and achieve positive outcomes. Accountability is especially important when it comes to monitoring and improving the subsidiary hospital's patient experience goals. Why is this essential ingredient so elusive? One word: clarity.

It's impossible to have a culture of accountability without clarity. As one experience leader put it, "Understanding the relationship between accountability and clarity is critical to elevating the work we do." There is no reasonable way to hold people accountable for meeting expectations if they don't know what those expectations are.

The board and senior leadership play a key role in setting expectations at the top and creating a culture of transparency. Questions they should consider and address to help facilitate clarity in the experience context include:

- What does experience mean to our hospital, as well as our parent organization?
- What does it mean to the people our hospital serves?
- Who is responsible for the patient/consumer experience?
- How is success measured?
- What behaviors and practices are expected?
- Does everyone know how to do what's expected?
- Does everyone feel safe asking for help?
- What happens if we meet or exceed goals?
- What happens if we don't meet goals?

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An Experience Strategy Framework

Creating a culture of accountability and recognition is one of the bodies of work that form a robust patient experience strategy. The term "bodies of work" is used intentionally because a strong strategy is more than a document; it articulates and prioritizes partnerships, workflows, and tactics required to solve problems and reach goals.

A patient experience strategy framework for subsidiary boards and senior leaders includes six bodies of work:

1. **Create a durable experience infrastructure.** As with any priority, executive and board visibility and support is fundamental to elevating experience for everyone in the organization. The board and C-suite should collaborate with patient experience leaders to reinforce the meaning and importance of experience alongside associated expectations at every level of the organization.
2. **Make workforce experience part of the patient experience strategy.** Patient experience strategic plans should include meaningful avenues for making clinical and non-clinical staff feel respected, valued, and heard. Addressing "rocks in the backpack" like broken systems and outdated policies is at least as important as soliciting feedback via engagement surveys.
3. **Recommit to evidence-based best practices.** Some practices stand the test of time because, when done consistently and effectively, they make a difference. For example, practices that are proven to move the needle on HCAHPS scores include cultivating patient comments, nurse leader rounding, accelerated service recovery, and automated discharge calls.[1]
4. **Maximize data for greater Human Understanding.**[2] A strategic approach to patient experience data provides a tracking mechanism, early-warning signal, and call to action. At minimum, frontline leaders should view patient feedback as a way to understand preferences, monitor progress, coach teams, recognize desired behaviors, assess gaps, and perform service recovery.
5. **Align experience with other organizational pillars.** Make it clear in words and practice that experience is aligned and intertwined with strategic priorities such as staff retention, quality, safety, and equity. Work closely with other leaders throughout the system to coordinate efforts and channel energy.
6. **Create a culture of accountability and recognition.** Step one is clarity about expectations around experience. Authentic recognition, especially in the form of patient comments, is fuel for the soul. It connects people to purpose and reminds them that their hard work is appreciated. Equally important is honest and respectful feedback if/when work is not up to par.

Using this experience strategy framework can provide the structure to help subsidiary hospital leadership prioritize where to focus, ensure board and management

1 "Moving the HCAHPS Needle," NRC Health, nSights, June 8, 2023.

2 "The Power of 'Doing' Human Understanding," NRC Health, nSights, November 1, 2022.

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accountability, effectively work with their parent organization to align and achieve goals (see sidebar), create a roadmap for sustainable execution, and drive positive changes at their organization.

Working with the System on Experience Strategy

Subsidiary/local boards can work collaboratively with their parent organization by:

- Developing experience goals that align with system-wide objectives to ensure consistency throughout the system.
- Meeting with system leaders to collaborate, share updates, and address any challenges. It can also be helpful to collaborate with leadership throughout the system to share best practices and successful strategies.
- Leveraging the resources available at the system level to improve and monitor patient experience (e.g., technical support, patient experience tools, data analytics, training and development programs, etc.).
- Promoting the system-wide vision and focus on patient experience at the local level.

Priorities and Roles

Research NRC Health conducted with experience leaders and CEOs across 138 health organizations in Spring 2023 reinforces the importance of mutual understanding and agreement about priorities and roles. For starters, we asked people in both groups to select the three challenges that experience leaders should own. While the same "top three" emerged across both groups—and there is no question that all are mission-critical—the relative order is instructive:

What are the top three challenges faced by your organization that experience leaders should own?

	Experience Lead n = 152	CEO n = 24
Aligning experience with other organizational priorities	38%	29%
Keeping teams motivated to focus on experience	32%	46%
Sustaining experience initiatives	31%	**58%**

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While these results should be considered directional rather than definitive, more than half of the participating CEOs emphasized the importance of sustaining experience initiatives, double the proportion that highlighted aligning experience with other organizational priorities. Unless experience is clearly aligned with other priorities (e.g., quality, safety, workforce, and equity), sustaining experience initiatives will remain a distant and almost unreachable goal.

NRC Health also asked experience leaders about the perceived role of their CEOs—the extent to which they are "proactive" (passionate, energizing, and a visible champion), "reactive" (nominal champion who helps if asked), or "not active" (not a champion, given other priorities). The results are telling: there was relative balance between experience leaders reporting that their CEO is proactive or reactive when it comes to championing experience.

Key Board Takeaways

- Set a culture at the top that values the patient experience. Reinforce the meaning and importance of patient experience throughout the organization and community.
- Ensure the hospital has a robust patient experience strategy that aligns with the system's strategy and outlines partnerships, workflows, and plans for achieving goals.
- Be clear about expectations and accountability. Make sure that management understands what is expected of them and has the tools and resources to train their teams and achieve set goals.
- Ensure that the board is regularly updated on patient experience initiatives, measures, and goals, and that there is transparency throughout the organization.
- Align patient experience with other strategic priorities such as staff retention, quality, safety, and equity. These strategies should be intertwined with teams throughout the hospital and the system working together to achieve goals.
- Take a proactive leadership approach. The CEO/President and board cannot be passive about patient experience. They should be passionate, energizing, and visible experience champions.

The same pattern emerged when we posed this question to more than 150 experience leaders who attended our workshop at NRC Health's 2023 Human Understanding Beyond conference. However, when we asked what their CEOs would say, there was a major disconnect: nearly everyone reckoned that CEOs see themselves as proactive. Indeed,

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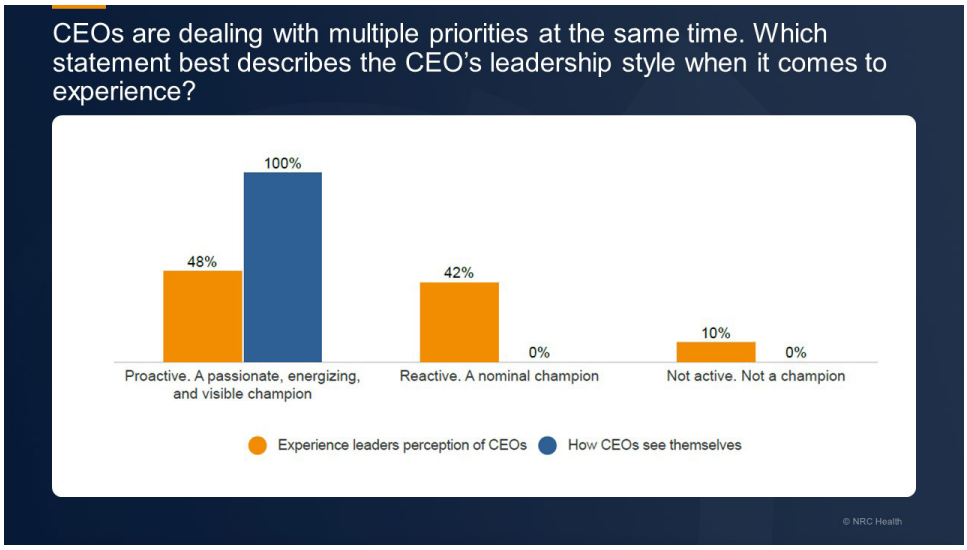
while the CEO sample in our survey was small, 100 percent of those who participated see themselves as proactive. This may be because less-engaged CEOs did not respond, or because there is a disconnect between perception and reality. Either way, clarity about both priorities and roles is paramount.



Bottom Line

When it comes to experience, success requires a focus on what matters to the people seeking and delivering care, as well as clarity about roles, priorities, and expectations for purposeful action. While organizations may have some of the bodies of work in place or in progress, all of them are necessary. Striving for clarity within and across these strategic imperatives is the first step toward gaining accountability in turning aspiration into action.

TGI thanks Toya Gorley, Improvement Advisor, NRC Health, for contributing this article. She can be reached at tgorley@nrchealth.com.

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