

Developing an Engaged Workforce Through Increased Communication and Meaningful Action Plans Supports Hospital System's Employer of Choice Goal

It is no wonder that UW Health, the academic medical center affiliated with University of Wisconsin Health, is recognized as one of the most progressive and prominent medical centers in the United States. With a dedicated staff and expert physicians focused on delivering high quality patient care, the organization has recently received many accolades from industry organizations such as The Leapfrog Group, a consortium of public and private organizations that purchase healthcare, and the University HealthSystem Consortium, an alliance of academic health centers in the United States and its affiliated hospitals.

With the goal of providing the highest level of care, UW Hospital and Clinics' integrated health care network brings together a mix of facilities, practitioners, technologies and business functions to maintain the highest standards of excellence, satisfaction and quality to exceed patient expectations.

Acknowledging that highly engaged employees improve the continuity of patient care, the organization partnered with Kenexa, a leading provider of talent management solutions, to survey its population and identify areas for improvement to advance its agenda of being an employer of choice. Although survey results revealed already high levels of engagement, the organization has further fueled its momentum by instituting meaningful action plans and fostering improved communication and recognition programs across the organization.

"Our key challenge is to deliver high quality, safe patient care. To do that we need talented and engaged employees," stated Janice Bultema, vice president of human resources for UW Hospital and Clinics. "Having the right workforce with the right attitude and motivation influences the patient care that is provided and the outcome of that care."

Charged with advancing the organization's agenda of being an employer of choice in both the county, in which it resides, as well as across the state, and having done significant research around engagement, Bultema presented the concept of engagement surveys to a strategic committee devoted to increasing UW Hospital and Clinics' mission of being a preferred place to work. Although it had used satisfaction surveys in the past, it had not surveyed the organization in approximately three years.

While the culture at UW Hospital and Clinics already includes a great deal of informal communication and regular feedback from employees, the committee agreed they needed to identify areas for continued improvement in the organization. Learning about the benefits of engagement surveys, the committee reviewed information from 17 vendors and invited four to present their solutions.

Kenexa's solution combines technological sophistication with high levels of professional support, delivering all facets of the program from start to finish via the web including design, fulfillment, administration, reporting and behavior change. To support its survey roll out, UW Hospital and Clinics created a communication strategy to prepare and educate employees on the difference between a satisfaction and engagement survey as well as and drive participation.

Implemented and themed internally as "We Need Every Voice," the survey initiative was supported from the top down with weekly emails from the CEO, multiple departmental meetings and various posters and presentations. Putting the work in ahead of time delivered a healthy response with more than 65 percent of employees participating—a 33 percent increase from the last time its population was surveyed.

"After the survey was completed and results tallied, our CEO sent out a concise summary of the results, what they meant and how pleased she was with them," said Deanna Kinney-Smith, senior employee labor relations consultant for UW Hospital and Clinics. "That led to the business groups getting their own results and starting to action plan."

Kenexa's multi-media resource library offers management action guides, specific recommendations for organizational change and action steps based on past successes and internal best practices. The UW Hospital and Clinics' managers used questions from the library to solicit feedback from employees to develop meaningful action plans.

"Our engagement index for that first survey was 70, compared to the Kenexa norm of 63 and Healthcare Best in Class at 72, so we were proud of our high score," added Bultema. "But we are never just satisfied with the status quo. We learned from the experience and developed customized actions and communication strategies for the areas that had the lowest response rate. We just completed this year's survey and achieved a 76 percent response rate, a 17 percent increase from last year."

Following the first survey, UW Hospital and Clinics' CEO assembled employees in quarterly forums to talk about results and action plans. Through Kenexa's proven Engagement Model, the professional team is able to prioritize survey results to recommend the action plans that will have the greatest effect on overall employee engagement. One area for improvement was that people wanted the leadership of the organization to better communicate a vision of the future. In response, the CEO defined and communicated the organization's main goals and now sends an email each Friday to keep employees motivated and apprised as to the status in reaching those goals.

Another area for improvement was recognizing employees for their contributions to the organization. One department used a bulletin board to highlight success stories and included visuals to illustrate what they had done. Across the organization, an online recognition tool kit was made available to managers. Three different levels of recognition—bronze, silver and gold—acknowledged employees for work that went beyond performance standards. Managers were also encouraged to bestow a token organizational gift with a handwritten card to further recognize employees.

"Having everyone collectively collaborate was powerful for our organization," said Kinney-Smith. "The recognition tool kit enables managers to provide immediate recognition and is well used. Our employees are talking more openly about recognizing each other and then in turn, feeling good about the work environment and giving their best effort on a daily basis."

Bultema notes that results from the most recent survey have just been tallied and results indicate improvement in engagement over the year prior. One area showing a statistically significant difference in engagement score improvement was departments where managers involved the work group in action planning as well as periodically reviewing the action plan progress.

"Our turnover rate is the lowest it has been since we began tracking it and our patient satisfaction scores are high," she said. "While there are other things working in tandem with the survey, I believe an engaged workforce generally experiences lower turnover and higher productivity."

Incorporating Kenexa's Exit Interviews into its employment strategy is another way the organization is working to reduce future turnover. Believing employees would be more forthcoming with a third party, and wanting a solution that would work in sync with its engagement survey initiative, UW Hospital and Clinics anticipates uncovering information that would be both actionable and meaningful to the organization's leaders. While engagement surveys provide information that enables the organization to further engage employees and motivate them to stay, exit interviews create the opportunity to learn why people leave as well as gauge former employees' interest in returning to the organization.

"We have instituted a lot of initiatives to support our goal of being an employer of choice," said Bultema. "When we first partnered with Kenexa, the CEO and COO wanted to survey our population every two years. They heard from managers loud and clear that they wanted to do it every year to show improvement. There was a lot of group effort to get us to 76 percent participation and managers want to use this to help motivate and engage their employees. This is now part of our culture and we are going to get better and better."

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About UW Health

UW Health, located in Madison, Wisconsin, is an academic health system comprised of the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics, the University of Wisconsin Medical Foundation and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. Website: www.uwhealth.org