

Training That Is Vitalizing Communication in Healthcare

BY ELI BECKER

Spectrum Health's employees use behavioral assessments to improve communication between themselves, colleagues, and patients.

Studies have shown that there is a strong positive relationship between the effectiveness of a healthcare provider's communication skills and his patient's tendency to follow through with medical recommendations, self-manage a chronic medical condition, and assume preventative health practices. Additionally, the quality of communication within a team of employees or providers affects job satisfaction, retention rates, and patient satisfaction and safety.

Thus, healthcare providers must have effective communication skills to relay sensitive health information, as well as to establish trusting relationships within a team of providers, including doctors, nurses, staff, and other healthcare professionals. Spectrum Health, an integrated healthcare system based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has recognized this need and has invested significant time and energy to improving communication and relationships.

Spectrum Health is a not-for-profit health system dedicated to improving the health of the communities it serves throughout Michigan. It's made up of 21,400 employees, 11 hospitals, and more than 170 service sites, physician offices, and outpatient locations, making it the largest employer in west Michigan.

Roger Jansen, senior vice president of strategy and chief human resources officer, explains the deep value they place on employees: "The only difference maker we have at Spectrum Health is our employees. It is not our buildings; it is the people who design and work in them. It is not our strategy; it is our people who author and execute our strategy. Employees are at the very heart of everything we do because everything flows from their ideas, knowledge, behavior, and efforts."



THE COMPANY: Spectrum Health
www.spectrumhealth.org



THE SUPPLIER: Wiley Everything DiSC
www.everythingdisc.com

Making a change

In support of this philosophy, the organization's HR department focuses on providing development opportunities to its vast community of employees and providers. One approach to development is through team effectiveness workshops using behavioral assessments.

These workshops and intact team in-services examine behavioral styles and provide a common language for communication. Spectrum Health adopted the DiSC assessment nearly 12 years ago. At the time, Roslyn Gkekas, who worked as talent programs analyst, advocated strongly for DiSC over other behavioral assessments for several reasons.

"One, it helped with personal development as well as team building, which some groups were struggling with at the time," she explains. "Two, it's short and simple. One could take it and understand it relatively easily; it's not threatening nor is it an IQ assessment. Finally, people could remember it. You don't have to remember a bunch of letter combinations or words that don't resonate with you."

Spectrum Health is still using DiSC today and it has affected hundreds of employees and providers. The DiSC profile “helps teams acclimate to each other,” explains Vicki Jensen, senior HR business partner. “The DiSC debrief process provides a safe environment for participants to interact with each other, but also allows the HR business partner to observe the team dynamics. This information is very important for the formulation of the ongoing development of the team.”

The ah-ha! moment

Everything DiSC, the latest incarnation of the assessment, provides participants with an understanding of their personal behavioral style as well as a narrative about the ways that various styles interact with one another. It also provides a language to help users express their behavioral style. The four styles are dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness.

Denny Macha, who helped implement the assessment’s use at Spectrum Health, says that it’s “a powerful tool in the healthcare industry. There’s so much information to process both internally and from the perspective of patient care, where working as a functional team is crucial. I am thrilled with the continued progress [participants] have made.”

Gkekas observed a similar development: “There’s an ah-ha moment when participants realize that not all the leaders and physicians are the D style. People tend to make those assumptions. When these thoughts are challenged, it opens the door to more productive conversations.”

This realization happens often among teams; it helps deconstruct assumptions about various titles and accompanying stereotypes. The Everything DiSC assessment “is helpful when working with clinicians who as-

sist physicians whom they may find to be a little intimidating. By understanding the style of the physician, it allows the clinicians to communicate better,” explains Gkekas.


Enhancing values

The assessment also supports Spectrum Health’s corporate values of excellence, integrity, compassion, teamwork, and respect. “Respect is clearly a cornerstone principle. We use [Everything DiSC] to better understand both behavioral differences and similarities,” says Pamela Haffenden, organizational development consultant. “This understanding leads to respect and ultimately more effective teamwork.”

Additionally, Gkekas has observed a parallel between the impact of the assessment and a team’s commitment to compassion. “In terms of patient care, those who work with bedside responsibilities or with family members really make an effort to impact empathy or compassion by having the right conversations. In the classes, you can tell that they’re trying to learn effective ways to have that sort of dialogue. It’s important to them.”

Everything DiSC has helped Spectrum Health understand behaviors and communication styles of employees, providers, patients, and families. Communication is a skill necessary in the healthcare industry. It affects not only the work environment, but also, as Spectrum Health has demonstrated, the quality of patient care and the actualization of corporate values. With such a commitment to communication both internally and externally, the organization is on the path to reaching its vision of being the national leader for health by 2020.

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