

Through a Patient's Eyes



CULTURE CONNECTION

The Pickle Challenge for a More Positive and Productive Culture

By Joe Tye, CEO, Values Coach Inc.

This is not the article I had intended to write. When *Arkansas Hospitals* Editor-in-Chief Elisa White asked me to write a sequel to “Strategies for Positive Cultural Transformation,” (Fall 2014) I’d planned to write about the fact that while culture does indeed eat strategy for lunch (an aphorism coined by the late Peter Drucker), strategy and culture working together in a mutually reinforcing way creates an unbeatable source of competitive advantage. But, as John Lennon once wrote, life is what happens while you are busy making other plans. As I was busy making plans for the sequel article, life intruded.

Editor's Note: This is a follow-up to "Strategies for Positive Cultural Transformation," which appeared in the Fall 2014 issue available at <http://www.arkhospitals.org/publications>.

On Sunday, October 25, I flew from my home in Iowa to Kenedy, Texas, where I was scheduled to spend three days at Otto Kaiser Memorial Hospital (OKMH), a critical access hospital that currently has a replacement facility under construction. During those three days, we were going to work on creating a "cultural blueprint" for their Invisible Architecture™ of core values, organizational culture and workplace attitude to help make sure that the employee and patient experience will be just as wonderful as their new physical building.

I wasn't feeling well but did not want to miss a commitment for the first time in my more than twenty years of coaching. That evening though, following a brief meeting with the leadership team in the board room, I was escorted to the emergency room where I was diagnosed with acute diverticulitis. I was admitted, and the CEO went to work cancelling meetings.

After four nights as an inpatient at OKMH, I flew back home where I spent the next ten nights as an inpatient at The University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC).

At OKMH, I was seen in an exam room that would have been familiar to Florence Nightingale (or at least one of her late 20th century descendants); diagnosed on a 16-slice CT scanner that's probably older than many of the people reading this article; and admitted to a patient room where the shower was down the hall (remember – they have a new hospital under construction). In contrast, at UIHC, I was seen in an emergency treatment center that would have astonished Captain Kirk from Star Trek; diagnosed with a cutting-edge 64-slice CT scanner; had a procedure performed by a renowned interventional radiologist; and was infused with the most potent cocktail of antibiotics that modern medicine has to offer.

Someone can't be cynical and negative sitting in the cafeteria or break room and then somehow flip an inner switch and become genuinely caring and compassionate when they walk into a patient's room. Patients see right through the fraud.

But if you ask about the care I received at these two hospitals, I won't even comment on the facilities or technology. **In both cases, I'll tell you that the care was excellent because everyone – from housekeeping to nurse managers – made me feel like I was the most important person in the hospital.** And I wandered the halls at all hours enough to appreciate that they made every other patient feel the same way.

I will also tell you that I – like most patients – could distinguish between the people who put their heart and soul into the work and those who are just there for a paycheck. And most of your patients have a better feel than you might think for the sorts of conversations that go on in hallways, nursing stations and break rooms. Someone can't be cynical and negative sitting in the cafeteria or break room and then somehow flip an inner switch and become genuinely caring and compassionate when they walk into a patient's room. Patients see right through the fraud.

The Essential Requirement for Positive Culture Change

A good working definition of organizational culture is that it's the collective attitudes, behaviors and habits of the people who work there. Given that, culture does not really change unless and until people change. And people will not make fundamental changes unless they perceive a personal benefit to doing so – especially if making these changes means running the risk of being criticized, ridiculed or ostracized by coworkers.

This is why so many customer service "programs of the month" fail to have a lasting impact. People memorize their "may I help you?" scripts and wear their happy face pins, but before long they're parroting the scripts like robots and wearing the happy face pins upside down. There is no lasting change, no perceived personal benefit, so they're just going through the motions.

The Healthcare Crisis Within

"Backbiting, petty scandal, [gossip], misrepresentation, injustice, bad temper, bad thoughts, jealousy, murmuring, complaining. Do we ever think that we bear the responsibility of all the harm we do in this way?"

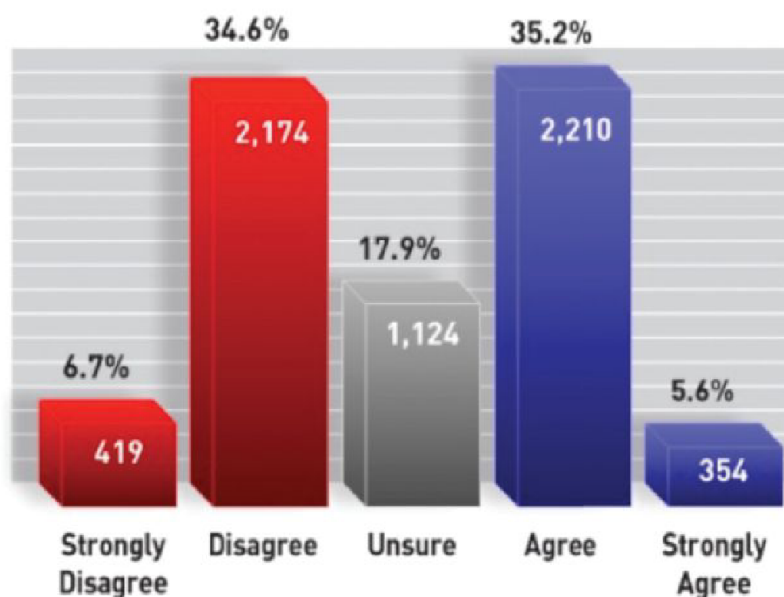
Florence Nightingale: Letter to Graduates of the Nightingale School

Consider these facts: 1) Gallup, Press Ganey, Modern Survey and virtually every other organization that studies employee engagement find only about one-quarter of all employees are engaged in the work; 2) last summer, the American Nurses Association issued a white paper on incivility, bullying and lateral violence in the healthcare workplace; 3) a literature review I conducted with a colleague showed

continued on page 26

Do you have a strong culture of ownership in your organization? A short quiz from the Values Coach Cultural Blueprinting Toolkit will give you a numerical ranking and brief assessment: assessment.valuescoach.com.

Our people reflect positive attitudes, treat others with respect, and refrain from complaining, gossiping, or pointing fingers.



Total of 6,281 responses from 15 different hospitals and healthcare professional associations

the word “bullying” in nursing journal titles 115 times over the past five years (and that doesn’t include the same and similar terms in medical or allied health literature); and 4) when we compiled results from our most recent 15 Culture Assessment Surveys, more people disagree than agree with the statement that they work in a positive and respectful culture (see chart above).

About 1,500 of the 6,281 responses to this question were from participants in a webinar I conducted on behalf of the American Nurses Association Leadership Institute. A majority of the follow-up questions that I received related one way or another to dealing with **toxic emotional negativity** in the workplace.

That is the healthcare crisis within. If every employee and provider at every hospital, long-term care facility and outpatient clinic in America strongly agreed with the statement, “Our people reflect positive attitudes, treat others with respect, and refrain from complaining, gossiping or pointing fingers,” we would far more effectively deal with the impositions of the external healthcare

crisis. And that is also why a movement to eradicate toxic emotional negativity from the workplace is almost always the non-negotiable first step toward building a more positive and productive culture of ownership. This culture change inevitably leads to better patient care.

The Pickle Pledge

If you are old enough to remember when people smoked everywhere – hospital cafeterias, nursing stations, restaurants, taxi cabs, even airplanes – you know how disgusting and occasionally debilitating it was to be chronically poisoned (and to see your children being poisoned) by other people’s cigarette smoke. And you remember how helpless most of us were to do anything about it, short of causing an unpleasant confrontation. You might remember that when Dr. C. Everett Koop called for a smoke-free society in 1986, many people wondered what *he’d* been smoking. After all, cigarettes contain an addictive drug and were being promoted by an industry spending billions of dollars a year to promote smoking and to protect what they called “smokers’ rights.”

Today, of course, virtually every hospital in America has a smoke-free campus. One never hears the term “smokers’ rights” or the question “Mind if I smoke?” The smoking section in most restaurants is out back by the garbage dumpster, and if anyone were to light a cigarette on an airplane, the air marshal’s role would not be to arrest the smoker but rather to save him or her from being assaulted by fellow passengers. The change in our culture has been nothing short of miraculous.



I’ve Taken The Pickle* Pledge.

“I will turn every complaint into either a blessing or a constructive suggestion.”

By taking The Pickle Pledge, I am promising myself that I will no longer waste my time and energy on blaming, complaining, and gossiping, nor will I commiserate with those who steal my energy with their blaming, complaining, and gossiping.

* So-called because chronic complainers look like they were born with a dill pickle stuck in their mouths.

Copyright © 2008, Valere Coach Inc. 

Toxic emotional negativity is the emotional and spiritual equivalent of cigarette smoke. It is malignant – abundant scientific research has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that toxic attitudes and emotions are detrimental to health and longevity. And it is contagious – one toxic, negative person can pollute the emotional climate of an entire work unit the way one person lighting a cigarette instantly pollutes the lungs of everyone else in the vicinity.

The Pickle Pledge is a very simple (though by no means always easy) promise that one makes to oneself and to others – to turn every complaint into either a blessing (“my head is killing me” becomes “thank God for modern pharmacology”) or a constructive suggestion (“the first symptom of dehydration is a headache, so I should drink some water”). By taking the pledge, one is also committing to not allow toxic, negative coworkers to ruin their day or to ever do that to anyone else.

In organizations where people really take this to heart, we are seeing phenomenal culture change. We’ve heard stories of people making incredible changes in their personal attitudes, and consequently, in their self-image and self-esteem. People have taken the Pickle Pledge home and shared it with family members. One nurse told me that her house was very quiet for several weeks after she shared the pledge, but then, for the first time ever, family members started talking about things that really matter instead of just whining about the complaint of the day. And we’ve heard from hospital CEOs who have told us that some of their most negative people are leaving – not because of a disciplinary process but because their coworkers simply don’t put up with them anymore.

The Pickle Challenge for Charity

During 2015, Values Coach tried something new with the Pickle Pledge. We challenged

continued on page 29

accord™

the recliner that does.





presented by
contract



INTERIOR DESIGN
HP
at NeoCon
HONOREE

WIELAND

501.708.2090

www.wielandhealthcare.com








Guiding Healthcare Solutions

Ramsey, Krug, Farrell & Lensing is a sponsored service provider of the AHA Services and administrator for the AHA Worker's Compensation Self Insurance Trust.



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS. DELIVERING EXCELLENCE.

The professional liability and property protection for your healthcare facility deserves the expertise of specialists. The Healthcare Division of Ramsey, Krug, Farrell & Lensing is one of the largest and most experienced group of medical professional liability and property specialists for hospitals, PHOs, IPAs, surgery centers, clinics, physicians, surgeons, and nursing homes in the Southeast. Call Tom Hesselbein today for more information at 501-614-1134.



BancorpSouth®

Insurance Services, Inc.

Ramsey, Krug, Farrell & Lensing

PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY
|
PROPERTY
|
LOSS CONTROL
|
TPA SERVICES

(501)664-7705 • www.bxsi.com

BancorpSouth Insurance Services Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of BancorpSouth Bank. Insurance products are • Not a deposit • Not FDIC insured • Not insured by any federal government agency • Not guaranteed by the bank • May go down in value

12 different client hospitals to raise a certain amount of money – typically \$1,000 – in quarters by having employees catch themselves and their coworkers complaining, gossiping or otherwise engaging in toxic emotional negativity (TEN). When this happened, they would be invited to deposit a quarter in a pickle jar. If the hospital hit the target and donated that money to an appropriate charity (typically the employee assistance fund), then we at Values Coach agreed to match the donation.

During the year, we wrote donation checks totaling \$10,000. That represents 40,000 individual episodes of TEN being caught midstream and unplugged. If this were sustained for a full year in those organizations, more than two million incidents of complaining, finger-pointing, rumor mongering and other forms of TEN would be prevented. Extrapolated to the entire healthcare system, we could eradicate more than a billion individual episodes of TEN every year.

Key Success Factors

In analyzing the most effective culture-changing initiatives, seven strategies stand out. These strategies can apply to any culture change effort and are not just limited to the Pickle Challenge.

Do an objective assessment, and take off the rose-colored glasses.

Research by The University of Iowa Department of Health Management and Policy shows that the higher on the organization chart one's position is, the more likely they will be to view their culture through rose-colored glasses.¹

An unpublished follow-up study shows a strong correlation between cultural clarity at every level of the organization and higher patient satisfaction and quality indicators. No matter how positive you personally think you are, and no matter how great you think your culture is, if you really start paying attention to TEN you will be astonished – and appalled – at how prevalent it really is.

Set a positive leadership example.

One of the most effective tools we have developed at Values Coach is the Self-Empowerment Pledge, which includes seven promises, one for each day of the week: responsibility, accountability, determination, contribution, resilience, perspective and faith. (You can download a poster of the pledge at www.valuescoachinc.com/pickle-challenge.)

At Midland Memorial Hospital, the CEO and every other member of the executive team wear their daily wristbands signifying each of the seven promises of the Self-Empowerment Pledge, and every morning one of them leads a large group in reciting both the Pickle Pledge and that day's promise from the Self-Empowerment Pledge at the beginning of the daily huddle, which is conducted at the front entrance in the main lobby.

Make it fun.

Effective culture change must have more the feel of a social movement than that of a management program. The best way to gain widespread engagement and ownership is to make it fun and even a bit silly. One of the ten core values at Zappos – which has turned teaching others about its culture into a profit center – is “Create fun and a little weirdness.” That's what the Pickle Challenge does.

Keep it visible.

At Midland Memorial Hospital, you see pickles everywhere. The Pickle Pledge covers the entire 25-foot long glass wall of the Human Resources Department; there are decorated pickle jars in most departments; and for special events the food service department will make Pickle Pledge cakes and cupcakes. After a storm knocked down a big tree, one MMH employee turned a 2,000-pound tree stump into a chainsaw carving that now stands at the employee entrance reminding people to leave their bad attitudes in the parking lot.

Unleash employee (and patient) creativity.

We have seen a variety of creative ways to launch and continue the Pickle



A pickle-shaped chainsaw carving stands at the employee entrance of Midland Memorial Hospital, Midland, Texas.

Challenge, including pickle jar decorating contests, pickle cake baking contests, singing pickles, dancing pickles, pickle statues and even pickle piñatas. The CNO of one of the Indiana University Health System hospitals recently sent me a pickle poem that had been written by a patient. The Pickle Challenge will uncover amazing creative talent, sometimes in the most unexpected places.

Pickles also lend themselves to all sorts of fun food-related activities, including creative cooking contests, pickle eating challenges, trading dill for sweet pickles, celebrating a week (or a month) of being pickle-free and decorating the cafeteria with pickle themes.

And don't forget to include your patients and their families in the change of culture. Post the Pickle Pledge where patients and their families can see it. Demonstrate to them that, together, you and they will meet all challenges.

Declare your organization (or workspace) to be a Pickle-Free Zone.

Borrowing a lesson from the movement to eradicate toxic cigarette smoke from public places, people are now declaring their own work areas to

continued on page 30

be Pickle-Free Zones. The Pickle-Free Zone door hanger that we produce asks people to “leave your gossiping, complaining, criticizing and toxic emotional negativity at the door.”

Nurture and encourage your champions.

It takes courage for someone to step up and be a “spark plug” for positive culture change – especially if that person has not historically been perceived as a positive cheerleader. One of the most important duties of leadership is to encourage, honor and protect those people who are trying to help foster a better organization by working at becoming better people.

Moments of Truth

On my fourth day at UIHC, the senior resident told me that I would probably need to have part of my colon removed and wear a colostomy bag for as much as a year. I instantly heard the voice of my inner victim whining about the prospect that doing the work I loved, not to mention solo hikes in the Grand Canyon, was about to come to an end. Then I looked over

the resident’s shoulder at the Pickle Pledge I’d taped to the wall. It was a mental moment of truth, and I had only seconds to decide which voice was going to win that argument – the victim or the fighter.

Six days later, I walked out of the hospital with an intact colon and a mountain of gratitude for the sophisticated medical treatment and compassionate nursing care I received. But I am also convinced that the real turning point came when I made the choice to not be a victim of this condition, but rather to do everything in my power to find a constructive alternative to that surgery. Though this can never be proven scientifically, I can feel in my very DNA the way the Pickle Pledge is bolstering my immune system as the fight goes on.

When will the “healthcare crisis” end? You know the answer to that – it won’t. Our jobs today are as easy as they ever will be. Reimbursement levels will never be more generous than they are today. No matter who wins the next election – or the one after that – the challenges will multiply. We can complain about them, or we can focus

on the blessings and create constructive solutions. I invite you to join me in choosing the positive way forward.

NOTE:

¹Vaughn, T., et al (2014, March/April). Governing Board, C-Suite, and Clinical Manager Perceptions of Quality and Safety Structures, Processes, and Priorities in U.S. Hospitals. *Journal of Healthcare Management* 59, 110-128.

Joe Tye is CEO and Head Coach of Values Coach Inc., which provides consulting, training and coaching on values-based leadership and cultural transformation. He is the author or coauthor of twelve books, including *The Florence Prescription* and *All Hands on Deck*, both of which are about building a culture of ownership. You may reach Joe at Joe@ValuesCoach.com.

Special offer from the author: If you would like a complimentary copy of *The Florence Prescription*, either email Michelle Arduser (Michelle@ValuesCoach.com) or call the Values Coach office at 319.624.3889.

Do your people own their work, or are they just renting spaces on the organization chart? The truth is, you cannot hold people “accountable” for the things that really matter. Caring, pride, loyalty, fellowship and passion all come from a spirit of partnership that is created by a culture of ownership.

Take the Pickle Challenge ... and Challenge Your Co-Workers to Do the Same! A more positive and productive culture will soon follow. Go to <http://www.valuescoachinc.com/pickle-challenge> for details.



VALUES COACH, INC.

**HELPING YOU BUILD
A CULTURE
OF OWNERSHIP**

**ONE OWNER
AT A TIME**