A Culture Change at Texas’ UMC Leaves Employees Feeling Empowered and Trusted

When University Medical Center (UMC) first tracked employee satisfaction with Press Ganey in 2002, it registered at a paltry 35th percentile nationally. So it embarked on a culture change that involved staff members in meaningful change, training leaders and holding departments accountable.

Vitals
University Medical Center in Lubbock, Texas, is a not-for-profit, community-owned teaching hospital with 412 beds, treating more than 300,000 patients a year. UMC is the primary teaching hospital for the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, and the flagship of UMC Health System. The system includes a children’s hospital and centers of excellence in cardiac, cancer and burn care. The hospital has the region’s only Level I trauma center. UMC Health System employs almost 3,000 people.

Challenge
When the health system first tracked employee satisfaction with Press Ganey in 2002, it registered at a paltry 35th percentile nationally. UMC is located in Lubbock, isolated among the high West Texas plains, and many of the employees were from the city and the surrounding region. The survey revealed employees’ loyalty was perhaps owed to their friends and family and relationships at work, but not necessarily their jobs.

One of those surveyed was speech pathologist Jennifer Hanners. Early on in her career at UMC she was summoned for a consultation in the intensive care unit. “The patient never received my care,” Hanners says, recalling the experience of 15 years ago. “I was told by the physician that I wasn’t needed and that, basically, my job was useless.”

What’s worse, the UMC medical staff that witnessed this exchange didn’t offer any sympathy. Certainly, after a short time on the job, Hanners didn’t feel like she was part of a team, and she wasn’t satisfied with her job.

“I didn’t want to work at UMC anymore,” she says. “I hated the culture. I’m sure my patients felt the weight of my disappointment, even though I tried to hide it.”

Solutions
Using results from Press Ganey employee surveys, UMC embarked on a culture change designed to turn the situation around. Leaders knew they needed a business strategy to achieve the change they wanted. It was important not only for administrators to be visible, from rounding on staff and patients to serving hamburgers at employee celebrations, but also for them to implement meaningful changes, said Mark Funderburk, UMC’s administrator. It did that by recognizing hard work, asking employees for suggestions, training leaders and holding departments accountable.

The Rewards and Recognition Committee was created a decade ago to administer monthly employee awards and plan companywide picnics and receptions. However, the committee eventually created a recognition infrastructure that greatly improved employee satisfaction.
The committee created four additional awards — letting employees of all areas know their good work would be rewarded. Committee members agreed that the environmental services employee who takes the time to share Bible verses with a struggling family provides a healing effect to those in need, just as clinicians do. The committee also organized team competitions such as “Holiday on Wheels,” a parade of floats built from items like stretchers, IV poles and wheelchairs, and led them through the UMC Children’s Hospital at Christmas. As a result, co-workers rallied to make the best float, and employees’ morale soared when they entertained the children. On Press Ganey surveys, employees were encouraged to offer suggestions to improve UMC. As a result, changes were made to such things as dental insurance, parking shuttles, cafeteria hours and retirement plans.

Performance and Outcomes

Today, UMC is a model for employee partnership. Employee satisfaction has skyrocketed, reaching at least the 90th percentile the past four years, with a high of 97th in 2009. Turnover at the campus’ teaching hospital fell from 40% in 2000 to less than 15% a decade later. Texas Monthly, an Austin-based publication that dubs itself “The National Magazine of Texas,” has listed UMC three times in recent years among the best companies to work for in the state.

“We working at a hospital, you give a lot of yourself,” Hanners says. “But now you know that someone sees what you are doing and is proud. Now there’s a reason why I choose to work at UMC.”

“What it tells us is that our employees are really engaged,” says Mark Funderburk, UMC’s administrator. “Not only are engaged employees good for business, they are good for the health of UMC, and more to the point, for the health of our patients.”

The names on the surveys were anonymous, but the suggestions and the changes they created were not. Administrators and those tasked with encouraging participation made sure employees knew that their suggestions were being heard, by publicizing the changes made each year. As a result, participation grew. UMC’s 3,000 employees produced thousands of comments each year as they completed the Press Ganey survey.

Hanners — who by this time served on the Rewards and Recognition Committee, which promoted the survey — said changes made to the health system made the survey “tangible to employees.” And as more employees wanted to take the survey, the committee made it available to night employees and those working at remote locations away from the primary hospital with a “mobile survey team.”

It was also important to train leaders in this new business strategy, Funderburk says. UMC now offers leadership training at three levels — for all employees in leadership positions, including “the next 100” future leaders; for newly hired/promoted managers and directors; and an advanced course for leaders seeking further skills.

And after a decade of survey results, there’s enough data to determine which areas have continued to struggle and target those departments for additional help. Evaluations for department directors are partly based on what employees say about satisfaction under their leadership, making directors accountable for the satisfaction in their area.

Press Ganey surveys have also been used at the health system’s physician management group, UMC Physician Network Services (PNS). Employee satisfaction scores have risen to the 90th percentile at PNS as well, and helped leaders address a serious morale problem found in previous surveys: employees felt they weren’t always treated with dignity and respect.

“We spend the majority of our waking hours at work,” says Beth Paine, corporate director for PNS. “How your day goes while you’re at work really can affect your life at home.”

All UMC leaders are required to regularly greet employees at the main hospital entrances, write weekly thank-you notes to staff and attend leadership development. Additionally, testimonial videos of patients and staff are produced to galvanize the efforts toward service excellence – internal marketing that’s proven popular and effective in driving positive change.

Improved employee satisfaction has also had a strong correlation to patient satisfaction and ultimately UMC’s market share. “We learned we cannot improve and sustain patient satisfaction unless we first listen to, reach out to and retain our valued employees,” Funderburk says.

As employee satisfaction grew, so did patient satisfaction and market share. In 2011 UMC saw inpatient satisfaction hit the 99th percentile five months in a row. Taking a longer look back, UMC’s market share has grown steadily since the cultural transformation began.

The Press Ganey survey at UMC initiated a new culture and a corresponding business strategy that’s evident to employees, patients and the West Texas community, Funderburk says. “We are blessed with a terrific team of passionate staff — they are the foundation for our continued success.”