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Leadership by the numbers: a catalyst for healthy change

By Russ Lipari

Spending hours a day collecting, analyzing and presenting data to check program goals, milestones and setbacks is a time consuming challenge when running any business, let alone a hospital. When needing to know “how are we doing”, increasingly hospitals and health systems are turning to innovative tools that quickly boil large amounts of data into manageable snapshots on key areas of performance.

With numerous regulatory initiatives in the pipeline, many in the hospital community are necessarily shifting strategies to incorporate more real-time management tools to improve business performance. While some such tools are often limited to the desktops of key decision makers, a few tools are making their way into the market that are grounded in open book management principles. By providing a heightened sense of openness, accountability and transparency throughout the organization, these business and clinical intelligence tools are designed to empower managers at the point of care and service – where strategic initiatives are actually put into action.

Edison based, Solaris Health System (www.solarishs.org) uses one such tool, Insight, provided by Atlanta-based SciHealth (www.scihealth.com). When Solaris leadership recognized they could not get up-to-date information to make real-time decisions, they made it a point to improve and simplify their data reporting. They looked to change both spreadsheet based applications and other reporting mechanisms into one managerial and executive dashboard. “After installing SciHealth Insight, we were able to get up-to-date information in a user friendly graphical and statistical views,” says Alka Ivaturi, of Solaris.

Many hospitals still struggle with burdensome and fractured management reporting. The need to organize hospital data and report it, in a useful format, to appropriate individuals within a hospital or hospital system is not unique to New Jersey, of course. Hospitals in Rhode Island, Georgia and other states deal with varying regulatory, financial, and operational considerations, but all seem to have the same vital need to organize and share information from many disparate sources in a manner that allows faster, more accurate responses to patient care or financial issues. “We would get calls from lots of people who needed data from all over the organization. Senior leadership wanted a high-level report, someone else wanted a very detailed report. It became a difficult situation. Our quality specialists spent a great deal of time putting reports together,” says Donna Collins, director of quality management at Rhode Island Hospital (www.lifespan.org).

In looking for greater efficiency and transparency, Rhode Island Hospital also implemented Insight. “The burden of creating so many reports was lifted,” said Collins. “We as quality professionals now spend more time getting out to the units, talking about their quality issues, solving problems and facilitating resolutions. Because our data now “lives” in one source, when we need data it’s there for all to see.”

A primary goal of using a data management tool is to enable hospital management to do a better job in terms of managing their full portfolio of performance - the clinical, operational and

financial aspects of their hospitals. A good tool should provide the necessary building blocks to apply better disease and case management protocols, paving the way towards better overall health outcomes.

From a hospital staff level, implementing data management tools shifts the focus from data gathering and report writing to simply getting whatever data is relevant to a particular staff member's function quickly and without cumbersome or unnecessary information. This allows hospital staff to better monitor levels of patient care, and to address small problems before they become widespread, or to expand upon successes in a timely manner. Thus, through using these types of business and clinical intelligence tools, hospitals are learning to better the overall quality of care. Hospitals can focus on what become readily apparent, targeted needs and can make much more timely process improvement decisions. Hospitals no longer make decisions based on last quarter's financials or trailing end-of-month reports.

Business and clinical intelligence tools can also put specific data information in graphic formats and show hospital staff members how performance changes over any measure of time. This tailored and visual type of information sharing tends to spur feelings of responsibility and a bit of competition among colleagues, yet the transparency also tends to lead to a more collegial and proactive approach to decisions. When both staff and hospital leadership have the means to identify and address concerns before they become major problems, responsibility for improvement is shared throughout the hospital. In this type of transparent leadership environment, a culture of shared learning develops and promotes improvement revolutions within and among all levels of an organization. When improvement is the focus, the ultimate winner is the patient.

About the Author

Russ Lipari is Vice-president of SciHealth Inc., Based in Atlanta, SciHealth provides leading performance improvement solutions used by hospitals and healthcare providers across the country