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The Myth of Promise Keeping

Making implicit promises is easy but wrong if they are not kept.

Q. *All healthcare organizations have promises and commitments that are implicit in their relationships with their patients and families and the communities they serve. What are an executive's responsibilities for ensuring these commitments are kept?*

A. When people make promises or commitments, they create predictable expectations that the promises will be kept. Too often, they are not. These failures may be relatively minor or quite serious. But when the promise or commitment is implicit and when it is from a valued institution, the consequences are almost always damaging.

It is clearly unethical for a healthcare organization to make an implicit promise without a conscious intent to keep it. Hubris is generally not responsible for producing eloquent and admirable vision, mission and value statements. Instead, these documents are almost always the result of well-intentioned trustees, executives and physician leaders working diligently at a board retreat to create or refine a set of statements that will capture the essence of the institution's *raison d'être*, incorporating language that is succinct, meaningful, challenging and inspirational.

Annual reports describe the institution's impressive achievements; fundraising efforts explain why donations are so vital to maintaining and expanding crucial programs; and marketing campaigns are designed to attract potential patients, employees and physicians. At a minimum in each case, direct or indirect references to the mission statement are made. We would be surprised if they were not.

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Typical Implicit Promises

Providing exceptional patient care, demonstrating service excellence, improving community health status, ensuring effective stewardship of resources, treating patients and staff with dignity, respect and honesty—these are only some of the predictable elements found in many mission statements.

Irrefutably, these and comparable phrases are intended to convey a clear message to multiple stakeholders: The organization has defined its mission and is committed to meeting the expectations it has created by doing so; therefore, every mission statement represents an implicit set of promises. Nothing in the language suggests these promises will be kept only when convenient or when we have adequate personnel.

All our public expressions essentially have declared that our care will be safe, effective, efficient, timely and patient-centered. Some institutions also have indicated they would minimize barriers to access and reduce healthcare disparities. But having set forth these goals, there is an obligation to evaluate how the hospital is fulfilling its mission on both the macro and micro levels.

Information has always been available on the micro level, based on responses by patients, employees and physicians to questionnaires and surveys. Increasingly, information on a macro level is available through Hospital Compare and similar hospital rating Web sites.

Having Good Intentions Is Insufficient

Unexpected obstacles can certainly interfere with our good intentions and those of others. Uncontrollable events may make it impossible to meet once reasonable commitments. However, we should quickly determine when explanations for unmet promises are actually rationalizations and inadequate

excuses, whether made by others or ourselves.

People feel vulnerable, frightened, dependent and even intimidated when they are hospitalized. It is disturbing to hear an increasing number of individuals, including physicians and other healthcare professionals, advising their relatives and friends to spend as little time as possible without an advocate physically present in their hospital room to minimize the possibility of clinical errors and ensure commitments are met. This is a sad indictment of our belated and still too marginally effective efforts to create and maintain an environment that inspires a patient's confidence, not fear.

Frustration, disappointment and often anger are some of the most obvious reactions of those who are among the daily casualties of promise-breakers. In an article, published more than 20 years ago, about the importance of caring, I wrote: "How often does a staff member say to a patient, 'I'll be right back with some ice chips, I'll be right back with your pain medication or I'll be right back to help you with your bath'? We all know that delays can be unanticipated and frequently beyond our control as caregivers. Yet, we frequently leave a trail of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments, again not intentionally but because the words flow so easily and casually."

Improving Promise Keeping

Trust, like integrity, is an important but fragile commodity that,

once compromised, is very difficult to restore. Regrettably, there is no simple ethical recipe to propose or follow to guarantee a prompt reduction in broken promises.

On the individual level, avoid the temptation, often because it is easy, convenient or expected, to make or agree to commitments you cannot keep. On the institutional level, meet with patients and families who have been at the hospital and listen to what they have to say about the institution, the responsiveness of the staff, and their feelings about patient safety issues.

An organization's failure to fulfill a promise is not just irritating or disappointing; such behavior can have immediate and long-lasting ramifications.

Use role playing in training and educational programs to dramatize the significant consequences for patients and families of being dependent on the power, authority and resources of someone who lacks initiative or responsiveness.

Make teamwork more than a slogan in your hospital. Team members should communicate with each other and work together to achieve tangible goals whether the goal is ensuring every patient is visited each hour, hand-offs are smooth or patients and families have the information and opportunities they need to participate effectively in patient care decisions.

Be open and transparent with your community about where your hospital needs to improve and share your plans for accelerating your progress; consider ways to involve the community in your improvement efforts.

Highlight the link between the organization's mission and the expectation of patients, families, staff and communities that everyone associated with the institution will honor its commitments.

An organization's failure to fulfill a promise is not just irritating or disappointing; such behavior can have immediate and long-lasting ramifications. Every executive should challenge senior leadership to examine carefully how implicit promises pervade the institution's messages to determine where promises are not being kept and to develop action steps to close the gaps. ▲

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