



The Meridian Health Evolution

It is no secret that the health care industry in this country has suffered one serious blow after another. For hospitals and other health care systems, competition has escalated to new levels. Patients are more demanding and less accepting of mediocre and unfriendly care. Employees, who are already working long hours under less than ideal conditions, are demanding that the work environment change for them. They are less accepting of verbal abuse from doctors and administrators and want more involvement in the decision-making process that affects them and their patients.

This is the story of one health care system that made a conscious decision to change who they are, to break away from the stereotypical health care environment and create a culture where patients and employees feel as though they are being treated with care. To create this new experience, Meridian Health, a fully integrated health care delivery system located in central New Jersey and comprised of 4 hospitals and over 13 partner companies in 72 locations, embarked on a journey to change its culture, to create a culture-by-design, that would assist them in achieving their vision of being the best in New Jersey by delivering quality care and service.

Designing this culture included several training and benchmarking trips to one of the most respected organizations in the country, the Walt Disney World® Company. Attending the Disney Institute in Orlando, Florida, executives and influencers for Meridian Health, dubbed Passionate Champions, discovered the elements of a culture that treats customers like valued guests and employees as valuable resources, deserving of respect and involvement.

In May of 2005, the Passionate Champions formed three teams, Best Workplace, Best Team, and Best Care. Representing leadership excellence, employee excellence, and patient satisfaction, these teams set out to implement *The Meridian Way*. This culture-by-design would be illustrated by leaders leading by example and creating an environment of ownership and employee commitment to delivering an exceptional care experience for the guests and patients of Meridian Health.

The Best Workplace team focused on issues such as leadership effectiveness and worked to define the five elements that would drive the Meridian Way culture: language and symbols, heritage and traditions, shared values, quality standards, and traits and behaviors. Meridian leaders are expected to “model their commitment to the organizational values on a daily basis.” They are held to higher standards as outlined in the five leadership behavioral competencies and the five key performance measures. Meridian leaders are held equally accountable for positive behaviors as they are for achieving positive business results. They receive multi-rater feedback on behavior through an electronic 360 process and are required to prepare a personal development plan. The expectation is that senior leaders will live and demonstrate, through their behaviors, the core values of the Meridian Way; values that include honesty, integrity, respect, compassion, balance and diversity.

Meridian already had a screening process in place to select for Talent. The Best Team committee members enhanced this process for hiring right-fit talent by identifying non-negotiables for which all potential team members would be expected to meet during the selection process. These non-negotiables included new appearance standards and expectations that all team members would be held accountable to deliver. Another way to support right-fit hiring was the creation of Team Member Referral Cards, which current team members could give to people they felt would make an exceptional addition to the Meridian Health Team. Finally, a total rewards approach was taken, as articulated by John Sindoni, SPHR, Senior Vice-President of Human Resources. “At Meridian, when we refer to a total rewards approach, we’re talking about a highly integrated program that is specifically designed to make us the workplace of choice by meeting the needs of our employees and supporting our organization’s mission, vision, and values. These are programs that make a major statement about our organization and the kind of true partnership Meridian wants to have with all of its employees.”

The Best Team also examined the current training programs to better align with the new culture and prepare new Team Members for success in the operation. They established a new employee orientation program called “Traditions” and a new leaders orientation program called “Leadership Fundamentals” under the umbrella of the Team Meridian University. Additional training includes service training and diversity training, linking to the vision and core values of Meridian Health. But once you train, you must reinforce the key messages through communication. Leaders recognize that open and honest communication fosters team commitment and provides the tools and resources for exceptional performance. To that end, a variety of tools are used to promote timely and accurate communication through appropriate and efficient channels. The tools employed include learning maps to facilitate understanding of Meridian’s strategic plan, face-to-face meetings, real time communication centers utilizing plasma screen TV’s, communication boards in all departments, monthly updates of the organization’s key indicators inclusive of financial information, a weekly newsletter, a bi-monthly team member magazine, the use of team member huddles, and an open-door policy that encourages two-way communication between all levels of team members and senior management.

To perpetuate successful team behaviors, individuals and teams that work together to achieve success are rewarded through the five-level Galaxy Program, the formal mechanism that was developed to provide recognition and small gifts to individuals and teams. This is not the only way that Meridian Health creates a caring and supportive environment for team members. In 2005, a concierge service was implemented to better support team members in having balance, another core value of the organization. Leaders at Meridian Health understand that if you take care of your employees, they will take care of the customer.

Focusing on the patient experience, the Best Care team defined the Brand Promise, the patient experience cycle and the guidelines for patient service and service recovery. A great deal of work was done on defining and clarifying the 3 quality standards of Safety, Professional Excellence with Personal Concern, and Efficiency. This creates greater consistency in the delivery of quality service throughout the organization. In focusing on the integrated delivery systems of Team, Setting and Processes, attention to detail would improve the patient’s overall experience and give Meridian Health a sustainable competitive advantage over the other health care providers in the area. Accountability was established through the development of new team member competencies and a goal alignment tool in connection with the performance management process.

The three teams of Passionate Champions realized that to accomplish this aggressive goal of redesigning their culture, all employees, now called Team Members, needed to be involved in the

design of the new culture. In August of 2005, numerous employee focus groups were held to clarify, define, and validate the work that had been accomplished by the three teams. In February of 2006, over twenty rollout sessions were held for all team members in the organization. The purpose of the rollout sessions was to update every team member, share the progress and the success to date of the new culture, and articulate the role of each team member in continuing the success of the new Meridian Way. During this roll out, John Lloyd, the President and CEO reminded the Team Members that, “This [cultural change] is not about policies and procedures. It is about how we feel inside and how we’re going to take care of our patients.”

The Meridian Way

A Culture of Excellence



The Meridian Health Results

Successes for Meridian Health, as a result of the work done in designing the Meridian Way culture, have been phenomenal:

- The organization was awarded the John Eisenberg award for 2005, one of only two awarded to health care organizations in the entire country
- In 2005, two of the hospitals in the organization received the JD Powers Distinguished Hospital award, which recognized less than 40 hospitals in the country
- Riverview Medical Center now has 4 current JD Power Awards for Excellence; In-patient, Emergency Department, Outpatient Services and Woman’s Services
- 57% of the departments system-wide rated in Gallup’s top quartile for employee engagement
- Overall Patient satisfaction scores across all services have increased system-wide to currently being in the 80th percentile
- Each of Meridian’s hospitals have achieved the magnet award for nursing excellence
- For the past five years, Meridian Health has been recognized by NJBIZ as one of the top organizations on the list “Best Places to Work in New Jersey”

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LSA Partners has had the pleasure and honor of working with Meridian Health for the past five years, and has seen the effort and commitment to creating and sustaining the Meridian Way. Meridian Health was chosen as our role model organization because it clearly understands that designing a successful culture encompasses many things, but without question, it must begin with leadership. Leaders who have vision and are able to communicate that vision clearly and compellingly, who are willing to involve and engage employees in all aspects of the business, who realize the value of structuring the organization for success, who embrace change and implement tools and resources that ensure the success of employees during the change process, and most important of all, leaders who *walk the talk*, leading by example. Meridian Health is an exceptional organization with a strong culture-by-design and committed team members focused on delivering the highest quality, patient-centered health care services.

