

ASSESS THE HEALTH OF YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE

By Susan A. Murphy, MBA, PhD

Have you ever considered that your medical practice has similarities to your patients?

Both medical practices and humans are systems made up of many subsystems – and each subsystem contributes to the overall health of the entity.

Just as experts in medicine are now taking a more holistic approach when assessing the health of a patient, experts in medical practice leadership now look at all the systems in the organization to assess the overall health of the practice. This approach is known as systems thinking, which helps practice leaders understand how all parts of a system are linked together.

In our bodies, each organ, bone, muscle and nerve plays a unique role within the body. A strong contribution from one component can't make up for deficiencies in the others. It's impossible to diagnose the overall health of your patients by examining merely one component.

This systems approach can be used when assessing the health of your medical practice. How healthy is your practice? How effective is your team?

The model I like to use in my assessment of medical practices is Marvin Weisbord's six-box organizational model. I think of it as viewing the total medical practice system and its subsystems from an altitude of 35,000 feet. (See Figure 1)

The six subsystems are:

- Purpose
- Leadership
- Rewards and recognition
- Structure
- Relationships
- Resources and helping mechanisms

As seen in the model, there's a seventh component that complicates the interaction of these six subsystems: outside environment. An organization such as a medical practice is an open system and cannot be static. It will be affected by what is going on outside the practice, such as insurance plans, aging population and economic health.

Leaders must be proactive. Internal motivation for change based on being alert to market and other external forces allows an organization to dictate its strategy for managing change rather than letting those changes be forced on it from outside.

Overview of the model

Each of these six subsystems communicates to each team member what is important and how to behave, and each subsystem directly impacts patient care. The following sections provide some ongoing questions you should ask to ensure your team's performance is aligned with your practice goals.

Purpose

What business are we in? What values should guide our operating processes and are critical to our culture and success? How are we going to treat each other and our patients? What are our short- and long-term goals? Are the purpose, mission, values and goals aligned so that they are clear and do not contradict one another? The answers you find to these questions should guide your medical practice in setting strategies for the other components of the model.

Leadership

Who is connecting the vision, mission and values to the strategy, structure and systems? Who is developing our culture and empowering the team? Are all the leaders communicating similar messages through their actions and words? Is there continual coaching and continuous improvement toward the goals? Without the leadership to convey your purpose and connect it to the organization at large, your team risks losing sight of your goals and not building the systems needed to sustain success.

Rewards

Is there an incentive for doing all that needs to be done? Are we measuring the outcomes that tie directly to our mission and goals? Are we rewarding the values and behaviors that we want? For example, if we say that teamwork is one of our values, are we rewarding only individual accomplishments?



Figure 1. Weisbord's six-box organizational model

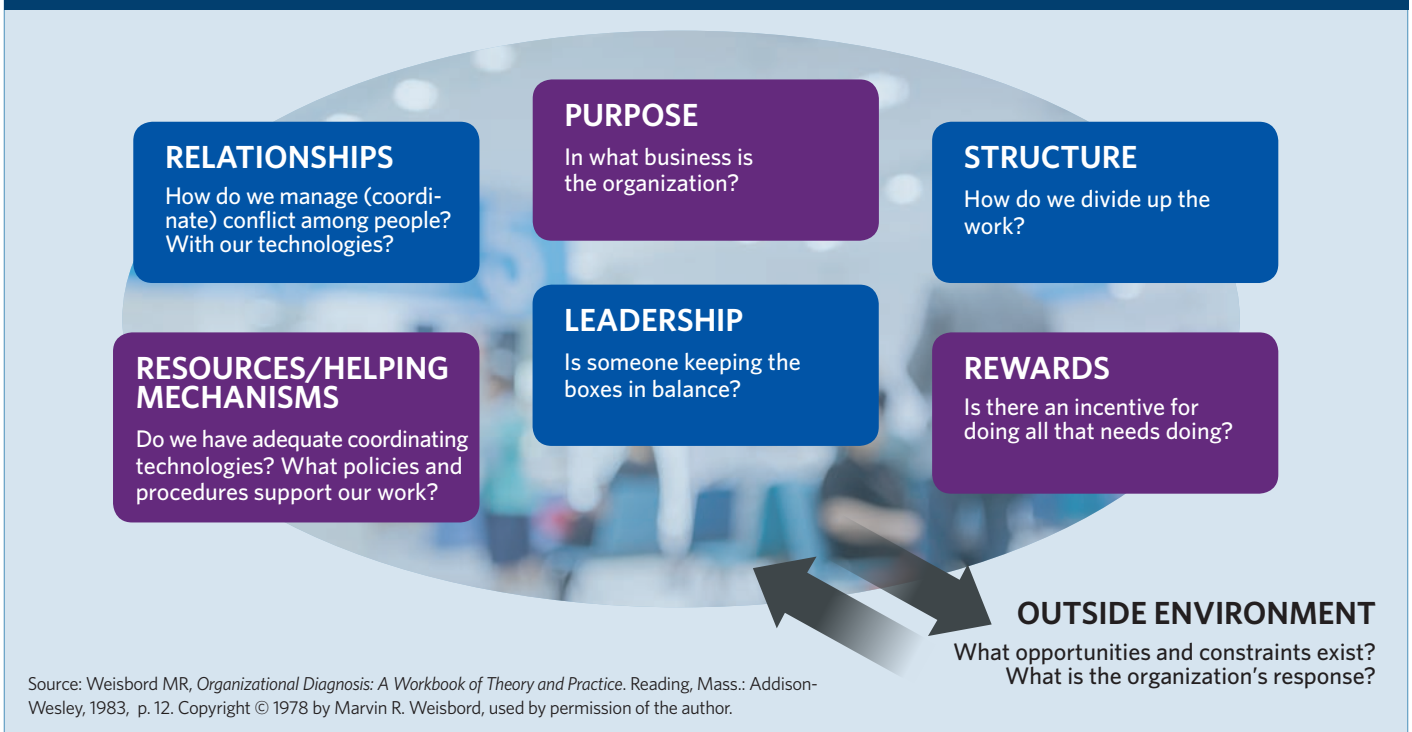


Figure 2. Benchmarking your team effectiveness

20 CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

The 20 characteristics in this diagnostic tool are based on characteristics of high-performing teams. Distribute this questionnaire among your team members and have them complete it anonymously. The characteristics are in the Likert scale format to be scored 1 to 7, where 1 means this characteristic is not present in your team and 7 means it is very evident.

Collect the instrument from your team members and for each of the characteristics, calculate the mean score and the range. This will demonstrate where your organization is excelling and where you can focus on continuous improvement to increase your team's performance. The lower the mean score and the wider the range, the more attention the characteristic requires from you as the leader.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR EXERCISE

Indicate your assessment of your team and the way it functions by circling the corresponding number on a scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high). Choose the number that you feel is most descriptive of your team.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. MISSION, VISION, GOALS AND PRIORITIES (Low) Team members don't know the mission/vision/goals/priorities. (High) Team members completely understand and agree with mission/vision/goals/priorities.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>11. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES (Low) Team members are unclear in their roles, responsibilities and performance expectations. (High) There is clarity in job roles and responsibilities of team members.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>2. VALUES AND STANDARDS (Low) We have very different values, and our standards are not clear. (High) We all understand our values and standards, and strive constantly to live up to them.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>12. REWARDS AND RECOGNITION (Low) Outstanding performance is neither recognized nor rewarded. (High) Outstanding performance is always recognized and rewarded.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>3. BRANDING (Low) We are not different from similar organizations; our reputation is not distinguishable. (High) Our brand is clear. Patients come to us because we're the best.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>13. TRUST AND CONFLICT (Low) There is little trust among members, and conflict is evident. (High) There is a high degree of trust among members. Conflict is dealt with openly and worked through.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>4. LEADERSHIP (Low) One person dominates, and leadership roles are not shared. (High) There is full participation in leadership; leadership roles are shared by members.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>14. COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING (Low) We are guarded and cautious in team discussions, and we don't listen to each other. (High) We are open and authentic in team discussions, and we listen and feel understood.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>5. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (Low) Leaders do not practice self-management, self-control or empathy. (High) Leaders practice self-management, self-control and empathy.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>15. DEGREE OF MUTUAL SUPPORT (Low) Team members don't know the mission, vision, goals and priorities. (High) Team members completely understand and agree with mission, vision, goals and priorities.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>6. LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION (Low) We do not know what is going on in other parts of the organization. (High) We are informed about important issues within the organization.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>16. DIVERSITY (Low) Prejudice exists among team members, and differences are not appreciated or respected. (High) Differences among team members are appreciated and respected.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>7. STRUCTURE (Low) Our organizational structure is neither efficient nor effective. (High) Our organizational structure is efficient and effective.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>17. PROBLEM-SOLVING AND DECISION-MAKING (Low) There is no consistent way that problems are solved or decisions are made. (High) Team has well-established and agreed-upon approaches to problem-solving and decision-making.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>8. TRAINED, PROFESSIONAL TEAM (Low) Staff is not oriented nor trained in their jobs. (High) Staff is oriented, well-trained and professional.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>18. CONTROL AND PROCEDURES (Low) There is little control and a lack of procedures to guide team functioning. (High) There are effective procedures; team members support these procedures and regulate themselves.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>9. PERFORMANCE (Low) We can't get projects finished; we don't follow through on commitments. (High) We deliver on time and on budget, and follow through on commitments.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>19. INNOVATION, CHANGE AND CREATIVITY (Low) The team is rigid and does not experiment with how things are done. (High) The team experiments with different ways of doing things and tries new ideas.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |
| <p>10. UTILIZATION OF RESOURCES (Low) Member resources are not recognized nor used. (High) Member resources are fully recognized and used.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> | <p>20. CELEBRATION (Low) Successes are not acknowledged or celebrated. (High) Team acknowledges and celebrates successes.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</p> |

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Structure

How do we divide the work? Do we have enough staff members to provide quality work? Are people trained to do the work they are assigned to do so that we can achieve our mission and values? Are the roles and responsibilities clear? Is the workflow design efficient and effective with the most appropriate people performing job assignments? Aligning your resources to the goals and purpose are a crucial piece to the larger organizational model.

Relationships

How do we manage conflict among people? Is communication open, authentic and plentiful to align everyone toward the goals? Is teamwork encouraged at all levels? Does the culture of the organization foster trust and collaboration among physicians, team members, patients and families?

Helping mechanisms (adequate resources and technology)

Do we have adequate equipment and technology to achieve the goals? Is our equipment in good working condition? Do we have policies, procedures and processes that support achieving our goals? Do we have ample budget to achieve our goals? This model will require you to assess the organization's capabilities beyond your people and facilities, and as a leader you will need to be honest about whether the job can be done properly.

Outside environment

Are there external forces that affect our ability to achieve the mission? Can patients pay for services? How has the internet changed patients' access to health information? Who are the main competitors? Is there a parent organization that affects the organization? Making sure your internal

subsystems are in order will allow your organization to meet the external challenges more easily.

How effective is your team?

A diagnostic tool (Figure 2 on page 32) based on the Weisbord model and 20 characteristics of high-performing teams may be used in concert with one-on-one interviews with team members in medical practices and other industries. Many clients use this annually to check on their progress and measure their continuous improvement efforts.

If you opt to use this questionnaire, I recommend these five steps:

1. Thank the team members for participating.
2. Ensure that the survey is anonymous.
3. Provide no retribution for scores and comments.
4. Share the results with those who completed the survey. If you don't inform the team members of the results, they will not complete it the next time.
5. Create an action plan to highlight areas where the practice is excelling and areas for improvement. Get the team involved. Communicate the plan to your team.

Some categories are easy to improve. For example, one area that is often scored low is celebration. When asked for their input, team members frequently have ideas for celebrating successes. By celebrating success, you can raise morale, reinforce your mission and values, and create a culture that encourages success to happen more often.

Physicians and other healthcare professionals have been trained to think systemically as they assess their patients. By applying a systems-thinking approach to leading medical practices, it is possible to create a healthy, values-focused culture for your medical practice. ■

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Learn more:

Managing an organization's performance covers a variety of functions, including continuously monitoring team member performance, setting expectations, planning and delegating work, rating employee performance, developing the capacity to improve employee performance and rewarding the great performances of hard-working employees.

Analyze your practice system-by-system and apply prescriptions that can improve your practice immediately. *Maximizing Performance Management: Leading your Team to Success, 2nd edition* by Susan A. Murphy, MBA, PhD, is a results-oriented book that covers key concepts, including:

- How to develop your practice's vision, mission, values, norms, and short- and long-term goals
- The importance of rewards and recognition
- The role of compensation and incentives in team engagement
- Compensation system design and evaluation
- Interviewing, selecting and hiring the best candidate
- Employee and physician orientation
- Performance appraisals that measure and align team members' performance with organizational goals

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