

# Multifunctional Staff Focus Groups as a Tool to Improve Employee Engagement of Clinical Trials Office Staff

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## Background and Significance

Karmanos Cancer Institute (KCI), a National Cancer Institute (NCI) designated Comprehensive Cancer Center (CCC), has continually strived for the best kind of environment for their patients and for their employees. The Clinical Trials Office (CTO) at KCI represents one of the four main pillars of KCI's mission and vision (Figure 1), and it comprises more than 160 individuals employed at the Institute. CTO staff play an important role in conducting clinical research. In clinical research, the staff perform 30% of the total work on the trial while the physicians perform 9% (Baer, Zon, Devine and Lyss., 2011). It was imperative for the CTO to focus on listening to their employees to avoid future employee burnout and ensure the success of KCI's nationally recognized Clinical Trial Program. Engagement helps to reduce the impact of work demands which can lead to burnout (García-Sierra, Fernández-Castro, Martínez-Zaragoza, 2016).

Employee Engagement surveys were disseminated to all employees at KCI beginning in 2016 utilizing a standardized survey. Employee engagement extends beyond measuring employee satisfaction. Employee engagement focuses on each individual's investment into their role in the workplace (Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010). Initiatives from KCI senior leadership were implemented after this initial survey was given, but scores remained lower than desired in the survey that was performed in September 2017. In response



Figure 1: KCI visual representation of mission.

to these scores, the KCI leadership team charged each department in March 2018 with the task of forming focus groups comprised of high performing employees (Buxton, 2018). The CTO decided to form three groups that included representatives across all clinical trial departments in order to create change within their department and the CTO overall. The CTO focus groups were comprised of members of various departments and locations that contribute to the functions of clinical trials at KCI, these departments are depicted in Figure 2. It was important for the success of the groups that no leadership staff were involved in the groups to allow for open dialogue between staff. The management team was asked to identify their "high performers" to be a part of the groups and represent their department. The focus groups were tasked in March of 2018 with increasing employee engagement scores quantitatively prior to an employee engagement "Pulse Survey" that took place in June 2018. The focus groups were directed to choose one area of concern found in the 2017 Employee Engagement Survey. The groups chose from the lowest scoring items which were communication, career development, and compensation/benefits. The three CTO focus groups chose to work on improving communication. Focus group members were encouraged to voice their honest opinions and create measurable outcomes to boost morale in the CTO and create a positive work environment for all those involved.

## Purpose

The objectives of the three Clinical Trials Office focus groups were to:

1. **Encourage** staff to take ownership of the department's employee engagement scores and culture
2. **Identify** key issues affecting staff engagement scores
3. **Develop** plans that could be implemented by staff to mitigate these issues.

The ultimate goal of these groups was to improve employee engagement.

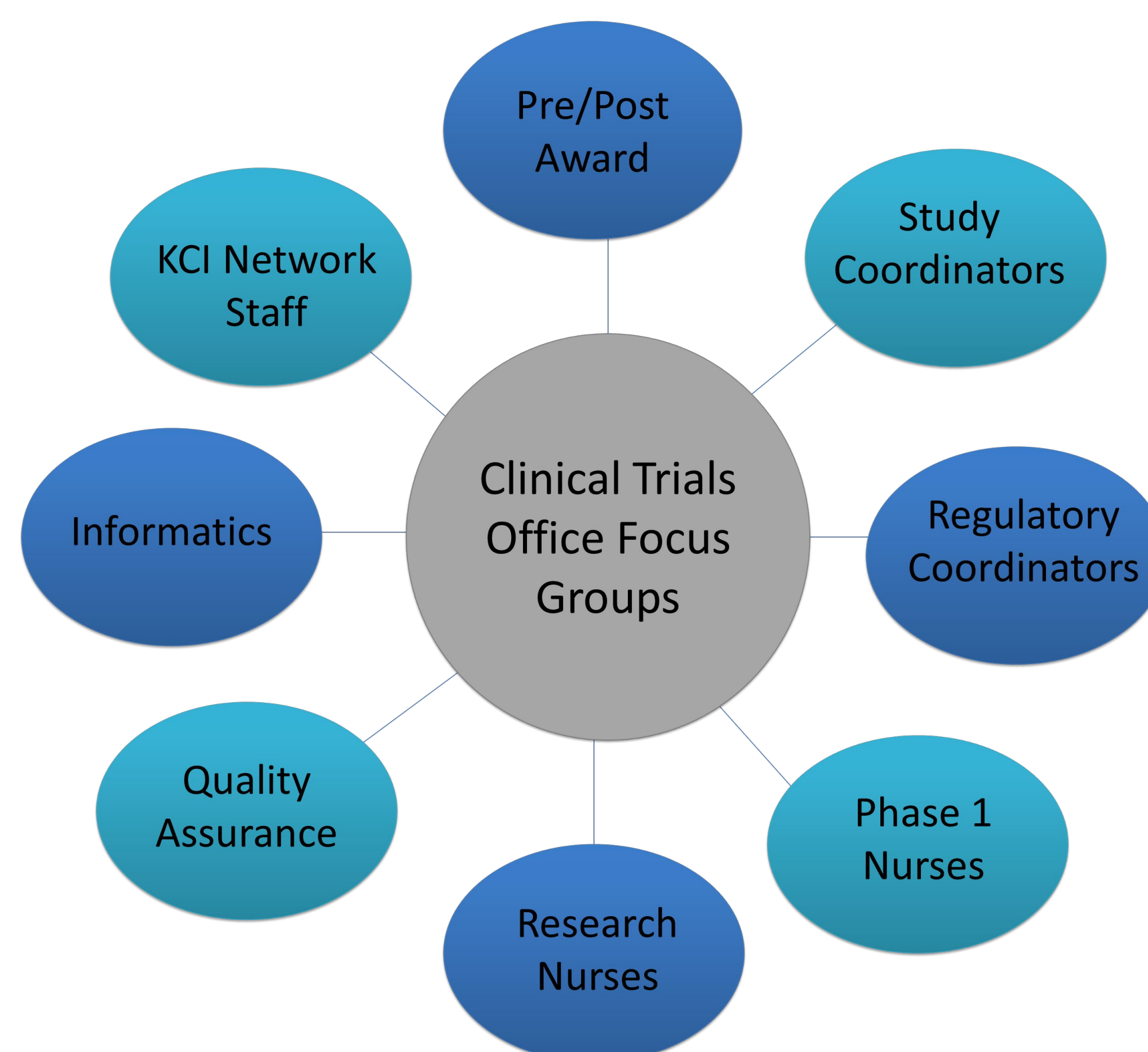


Figure 2: Composition of Clinical Trials Office Focus Groups

## Implemented Practice Changes

All three CTO focus groups chose to work on the low scoring employee engagement survey category of communication. The groups were taught techniques to assist staff to identify reasons for low scores. They then created 3 programs that helped improve communication between the department disciplines. Below is a brief description of each initiative.



Figure 3: Most recent CTO monthly newsletter

- ❖ **Monthly Newsletter:** A monthly newsletter is now implemented and highlights specific departmental updates, staff changes, open positions, one focus employee from the CTO and reminders about upcoming events/special projects. Staff are encouraged to post the newsletter in public areas because it acts as an interdepartmental liaison and a way for employees to get to know one another better. This initiative will be continued because leaders continue to hear feedback that the newsletter is enhancing communication within the CTO (Figure 3.)
- ❖ **Afternoon Walks:** To ease the stress of difficult conversations that can come with certain meetings in the office, CTO employees are encouraged to take a walk outside and confront these difficulties together in the fresh air. A simple walk in the middle of the day with fellow employees is a great way to get to know coworkers and foster a team-building atmosphere.
- ❖ **Anonymous suggestion box:** Employees are encouraged to utilize an anonymous suggestion box to suggest new initiatives, voice concerns, and create potential solutions in a concise way to directly communicate with management.

## Outcomes

The employee engagement scores on the standardized survey were compared from 2017 to 2018. The overall employee engagement category was stable from 2017 to 2018. Communication scores and the overall employee experience improved during the same time period. Table 1 summarizes these results. The three CTO focus group leaders met with the larger group of KCI focus group leaders every few months. The CTO groups were recognized for their success in developing departmental initiatives.

| Survey Category             | 2017 | 2018 | Difference |
|-----------------------------|------|------|------------|
| Employee Engagement         | 3.62 | 3.61 | -0.01      |
| Teamwork                    | 4.17 | 4.34 | +0.17      |
| Communication               | 3.16 | 3.30 | +0.14      |
| Overall Employee Experience | 3.87 | 4.00 | +0.13      |

Table 1: Selected data points from Employee Engagement Survey from 2017 and 2018

## Future Directions

Based on the survey results found in 2018, the Focus Groups have chosen career development as the area of concern to address in 2019. One initiative that is currently underway is an educational lunch session offered to employees. A pilot session was offered to all CTO employees and lead by 2 high performing focus group members highlighting the important steps in which a coordinator needs to take to obtain their SoCRA certification. This session was attended by about 40 staff including coordinators at satellite sites across the state of Michigan.

## References

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