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High-Performing Team Building: Leadership Strategies for Cancer Center Excellence

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Commentary Overview

- High-performing teams result when leaders create an environment where people feel valued, motivated, and empowered to contribute their best.
- To enhance team performance, tap into intrinsic motivation—the internal desire to do well based on personal satisfaction and alignment with values.
- Conflict can signal engagement rather than dysfunction. View it as a growth opportunity, focusing on underlying issues, not symptoms.
- Recognize the broader ripple effects of effective leadership. Small, purposeful actions by leaders and team members can profoundly influence organizational culture, patient care, and individual satisfaction.

As caring for patients with cancer becomes increasingly complex, high-performing teams are necessary to ensure the level of quality our patients require. But strong teams don't emerge on their own. They require intentional leadership that establishes the conditions for teams to thrive.

High-performing teams result when leaders create an environment where people feel valued, motivated, and empowered to contribute their best. This was the central message of my keynote at the 2025 AACI Leadership Diversity and Development Workshop, where we explored leadership strategies for cancer center excellence.

Creating the Right Environment

"Success is rarely the result of individual brilliance; it's the product of collective

engagement."

Leadership styles greatly influence team dynamics and outcomes. Too often, leadership is equated with top-down performance management, rigid hierarchies, and transactional reward-penalty models.

While this leadership style may yield temporary compliance, it is ultimately unsustainable and detrimental to long-term success. The problem is that it creates an atmosphere of self-preservation rather than teamwork and shared goals. Instead, effective leadership focuses on creating conditions that allow individuals and teams to thrive, leveraging collective strengths to achieve higher levels of performance and innovation.

A cornerstone of such an environment is psychological safety, which allows team members to speak openly, think creatively, and engage fully without fear of negative consequences. Drawing on the work of **Amy C. Edmondson** and **Timothy R. Clark**, psychological safety can be understood across interconnected domains.

Fundamental to this is inclusion, ensuring that everyone feels they belong and are valued. Simple practices like daily team huddles with rotating leadership can significantly enhance a sense of inclusion and shared responsibility.

Equally important is creating space for learning. Team members should feel safe to acknowledge mistakes, ask questions, and seek feedback without fear of judgment. Regular debriefs after key activities support reflection and continuous improvement.

Actively soliciting ideas and feedback from team members creates deeper engagement. Rather than a passive "open-door" policy, leaders should proactively have regular one-on-one conversations with team members to understand their perspectives and contributions.

Encouraging constructive dissent is also critical for innovation and continuous improvement. Some organizations have a policy of assigning a designated "dissenter" role to challenge ideas during project planning sessions to ensure that critical thinking remains integral to the process.

Driving Intrinsic Motivation

To further enhance team performance, leaders must tap into intrinsic motivation—the internal desire to perform well based on personal satisfaction and alignment with values. Drawing insights from Daniel H. Pink's influential book, **Drive**, intrinsic motivation is fueled by autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Giving team members control over their work increases their engagement and accountability. When individuals feel a sense of ownership, they become proactive rather than reactive, significantly elevating overall team performance.

Offering opportunities for professional development helps team members continually grow their skills, improving their confidence and effectiveness. This ongoing mastery fuels motivation and satisfaction, leading to higher retention and stronger team cohesion.

Connecting individual and team efforts to the larger mission is vital. In healthcare, particularly cancer care, it's essential to regularly reinforce the profound impact that team members have on patients' lives. Sharing patient gratitude or specific outcomes helps to ground the team's daily tasks in meaningful purpose, amplifying motivation and commitment.

Navigating Conflict and Enhancing Collaboration

Conflict within teams is often thought of as something to avoid; however, the absence of conflict is not the goal. Rather, the goal should be to address conflict constructively. Conflict can be a signal of engagement rather than dysfunction. Effective leaders view conflict as an opportunity for growth, focusing on the underlying issues rather than symptoms.

Helping teams adopt a mindset that assumes positive intent from others can significantly reduce tension, particularly during interdisciplinary interactions where miscommunication can frequently occur. A valuable mantra is to "be curious before becoming furious," emphasizing understanding before reaction.

Additionally, promoting collaborative practices is indispensable for addressing conflict. Structured team rounds, cross-department shadowing, and team training are practical tools for enhancing

teamwork and collaboration. These interactions help to break down silos, improve communication, and promote mutual understanding among professionals.

Leading with Vision and Strategy

"Developing high-performing teams is one thing; leading them is another."

Successful leadership starts with a compelling vision. Vision provides direction and inspiration, helping team members reconnect to the value of their efforts. Communicating this vision through storytelling is particularly powerful, as it connects emotionally and resonates more deeply than abstract goals.

Next, a well-articulated strategy offers a roadmap, reducing the uncertainty that often accompanies organizational change. Uncertainty, more than change itself, typically generates stress within teams. Clear strategies and transparent communication can mitigate anxiety, positioning teams to embrace and drive change confidently.

Providing adequate resources is non-negotiable. Leaders must ensure their teams are not only aligned with clear goals but also have the staffing, tools, training, and time to meet them. Without these elements, even the most motivated teams will stall. Effective leaders take responsibility for anticipating these needs and advocating for what will set their teams up for success.

High-performing teams also need momentum. Small wins, especially through well-designed pilot projects, can spark progress, validate ideas, and build trust. Early success creates energy, reinforces a sense of purpose, and helps teams see that their efforts are having an impact. These moments build confidence and commitment, which are essential to sustaining performance.

The Ripple Effect of Leadership

Finally, recognizing the broader ripple effects of effective leadership is essential. Small, purposeful actions taken by leaders and team members can profoundly influence organizational culture, patient care, and individual satisfaction. Identifying and committing to even a single change can have an impact far beyond expectations.

In conclusion, building high-performing teams in cancer centers is essential to our mission. Cancer center leaders can create environments where teams excel, and patients receive the highest quality care possible by prioritizing psychological safety, intrinsic motivation, strategic clarity, and collaborative practices.

Ultimately, leadership in cancer care demands intentionality, empathy, and a steadfast commitment to continuous improvement, driven by the understanding that we achieve more together than we ever could alone.

Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

About AACI Commentary

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