

# Building a Culture of Intimacy: Transforming Your Practice into a Place Patients Call Home

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**T**here is a growing number of practitioners who find that the busier they get, the less successful they are. They report that they are working harder, seeing more patients, and taking home less money. They have minimal connection with their fellow clinicians, staff members, or patients. They are unfulfilled and even disillusioned. Physicians aren't the only ones who are complaining—patient satisfaction and loyalty are decreasing, and staff members are holding negativity sessions in the parking lot. The solution is to exact a culture change by implementing a strategic operational plan in which your large practice is managed as if it were a small one. A Culture of Intimacy streamlines communications so that interactions are cleaner, more effective, and less time consuming. The benefits are measurable and palpable, ranging from enhanced patient, employee, and partner relations to increased referrals and bottom-line profitability.

**Key words:** Large practice; patient satisfaction; staff negativity; culture change; profitability; streamline communications.

What makes a medical practice a “success?” Is it the number of patients on record? Your reputation in the community? The longevity of your employees? The number of Explanation of Benefits sitting in your drawer?

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Is this success?

Remember when you really knew your patients? You knew all about their lives, their secrets, their triumphs, and their difficulties. You did more than diagnose and prescribe—you built *relationships*. You dispensed more than prescription samples—you delivered kindness and attention, familiarity and constancy.

You were there for your patients whenever and wherever they needed you.

In return for the relationships you built with your patients, they referred all of their friends and family members to your care. They never considered going to anyone else. They offered you their appreciation and respect. And they paid cash.

Your employees were different too. They were loyal, hardworking, and trustworthy. They went the extra mile, cared deeply about each other and your patients. They took complete ownership of the practice and stayed until they were too old or tired to work.

Now *that's* success.

Welcome to 21st century medicine—where significant improvements in healthcare have led to an exponential decrease in success.

Thanks to much advancement, improved diagnostics and treatment protocols allow physicians to provide more effective and efficient care while experiencing an increasing distance between doctor and patient, administrator and employee, practice and community. Mergers with other practitioners allow physicians to provide more call

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coverage, which means that, in an emergency, a patient is less likely to know the doctor he speaks to. Well-designed Web sites allow patients to learn all about a physician, download forms, make appointments, and get directions—all without ever speaking with a human being. Once the appointment is made, it is confirmed via automated voice messaging.

***Welcome to 21st century medicine—a vicious cycle where the more your business grows, the less successful you feel.***

Ms. New Patient (NP) arrives at the practice. She is greeted by a smiling stranger who asks for her insurance card and provides a clipboard with more forms to fill out. NP may sit quietly and anonymously for some time, careful not to lock eyes with the other patients in the room until finally, another smiling stranger comes to get NP (never calling her by name for fear of breaching confidentiality). Smiling stranger walks straight ahead, never looking over her shoulder as NP walks past doors that all look alike until she reaches the one set aside just for her. She follows smiling stranger into a small, clean room that is designed for the comfort and convenience of the provider, not the patient, and is asked to describe symptoms, history, medications, etc. Left alone to disrobe, NP thinks about all the things she forgot to tell friendly stranger and wonders what the doctor will be like.

*J.S., M.D.: "I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I honestly don't have time to build relationships. I'd like to think that I make a connection with my patients, but no, I don't think that happens anymore. My extender takes care of that."*

*K. M., P.A.-C.: "I thought that [building patient relationships] was what they brought me in for—but they're keeping me too busy for that. It's the M.A.s that get to really talk with the patients."*

*S. R., C.M.A.: "I used to sit and talk with our patients, but now I have to get them roomed and get the info into the system so that Doctor can get in and out. But the Front Desk is good—they know all the patients' names, and they spend time talking with them in reception."*

*A. L. (Front Desk): "You're kidding, right?"*

So, what's the problem? We're seeing 80 to 90 patients per doctor, per day. The practice is a success! Why change anything? Here's why:

1. Doctors aren't happy;

2. Staff members aren't happy;

3. Patients aren't happy; and

4. Low morale means low productivity, poor customer service, fewer patient referrals, and greater marketing costs to bring in more patients.

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*L. D., M.D.: "I used to pride myself in my ability to relate to my patients and to put them at ease. I thought of myself as an educator. I liked spending time with my patients. I just can't do that and make a living anymore."*

*M. F., M.D.: "My practice manager deals with staff issues; to be perfectly honest, there are a couple of people out front who are complete strangers to me. I'm told that we have some of the best staff in the area. I wish I had time to find out for myself."*

The bigger a practice gets, the further it gets from the people. So what is the answer?

Build a Culture of Intimacy within your large practice, and you will have the best of both worlds.

## WHAT IS A CULTURE OF INTIMACY?

A Culture of Intimacy is one in which a large practice is managed as if it were a small one. In a Culture of Intimacy, everyone is aware that their attitudes and behaviors are integrally entwined with everyone else's—and they like it that way. Every member of the practice is willing, able, and eager to *listen* to others' opinions and feelings and to weigh them equally with their own. Everyone seeks to learn new facts that will enable them to more completely understand others' perspectives. They ask questions, they listen to the answers, and they take all sides into account. They are skilled in rapid and effective methods of communication, which they use with everyone in the practice—especially patients.

***When everyone is on board, a Culture of Intimacy streamlines communications so that interactions become cleaner, more effective, and less time consuming.***

A Culture of Intimacy is one that strives to reach decisions by *consensus*. It utilizes a type of communication process that eliminates judgment and threats, and focuses on the generation of solutions that work for everyone.

There is no room in a Culture of Intimacy for independent mavericks. A Culture of Intimacy is a team environment. When everyone is on board, a Culture of

Intimacy streamlines communications so that interactions become cleaner, more effective, and less time consuming.

Few would argue the benefits of running a large practice with the intimacy of a smaller one.

## INTIMACY IN PATIENT COMMUNICATIONS

When you really understand your patients, you have a greater likelihood of making effective interventions on their behalf. Strong, intimate connections with patients allow you to take advantage of the power of the provider/patient alliance. Building relationships, utilizing effective communication techniques, and really knowing your patients and understanding their unique needs yields much more of what every practice strives for:

- Better patient care;
- Improved patient loyalty;
- Improved patient compliance;
- Increased attractiveness to potential associates/partners; and
- Decreased accounts receivable columns (Loyal patients pay their bills—completely and on time!).

## INTIMACY IN STAFF COMMUNICATIONS

Increasing the intimacy between management and employees yields even further benefits:

- Increased employee commitment;
- Enhanced employee loyalty;
- Reduced turnover;
- Reduced stress;
- Reduced sick time;
- Reduced cost of benefits;
- Improved morale;
- A more energized work environment;
- Greater productivity;
- Reduced negativity; and
- Reduced number of mistakes.

## INTIMACY IN PARTNER COMMUNICATIONS

The amount of time and money that is wasted by inadequate communications among partners is astounding. Stress levels are astronomical whenever partners get together to create a plan or make a decision. Rather than using their diverse perspectives to generate creative solutions, partners leave meetings frustrated and stuck. Increasing the intimacy among partners yields:

- Streamlined decision-making;
- Shorter meetings;
- More creative solutions;
- Improved physician morale;

- Less stress in the work environment; and
- Less stress brought home.

In a Culture of Intimacy, everyone wins with:

- Enhanced reputation;
- Increased repeat and referral business;
- Practice stability; and
- Increased revenues.

## SO, HOW DO YOU DO THIS INTIMACY THING?

First, the decision must be made by everyone in the practice, if you are to successfully implement your Culture of Intimacy. This is the most difficult part of the process! Following is a step-by-step process for making that happen.

### Step 1: Define “Intimacy”

*Intimacy* means having detailed knowledge and understanding of another human being. Within the context of a working situation, it means, “I want to know what you think and feel so that I can work more effectively with you and help you to get what you need.”

It is important to distinguish between *intimacy* and *intrusion*. *Intrusion* means, “I want to know all of your personal secrets.” That is *not* what we’re going for and shouldn’t be encouraged.

#### ***The three elements of intimacy are opinions, facts, and feelings.***

There are three elements of intimacy: opinions, facts, and feelings. When all three are addressed, there are no miscommunications. Instead, there is clarity, efficiency, and connection.

### Step 2: Be Careful What You Wish For

Before making any important change, it’s always important to take some time to make sure that you are willing to accept all of the consequences of that change. The fact is that a Culture of Intimacy is not for everyone. There are clearly some very positive reasons for doing this, but there will also be some major differences in your practice that you may not be completely comfortable with. So take a quick moment to review the downside.

#### ***Before making any important change, it’s always important to take some time to make sure that you are willing to accept all of the consequences of that change.***

A more intimate environment, by definition, means that you are going to be building closer relationships with people. The fact is that relationships require more energy,

more attention, more emotion, and more risk. The more we connect to people, the greater the likelihood that we will be affected by their problems, their mistakes, their illnesses, and their deaths. Some would say it is much easier to go through life without connecting because you avoid the emotional roller coaster and can coast through life on an even keel.

***Intimacy doesn't take time—it takes focus.***

Do the benefits of an intimate environment outweigh these “negative” elements? Only you can decide that for yourself. If you find that you are not comfortable with relationships and communications in your personal life, this may not be the right direction to take with your practice.

### **Step 3: Choose Your Team**

Short of sending your partners and your employees through a battery of social psychological testing, how do you know whether your current team members are going to be able and willing to effectively make a change to a Culture of Intimacy? The answer is simple: Ask them!

1. Begin with partners. Tell them that you are recommending a Culture of Intimacy and that you would like to hear their thoughts on the matter. Define intimacy clearly, and then ask them if they are open to learning new ways of communicating with staff and patients. The degree to which they are willing to discuss the issue will tell you whether they will follow through with the plan.
2. Get your managers together and have the same discussion with them. The more comfortable you are, the more you will be able to draw out their thoughts and opinions. Expect that they will be uncomfortable at first; remember, this is a real shift for some of them. Everyone who jumps on board by offering honesty without judgment or criticism is a keeper!
3. Continue the process with every employee until you have found those people who will welcome the Culture of Intimacy and contribute to its growth.

### **Step 4: Train Your Team**

Have a day-long retreat with everyone in your practice. Conduct roundtable discussions to encourage the atmosphere of communication that you intend to foster in your practice. Draw out their opinions, facts, and feel-

ings, and teach them to do the same with each other. Help them to make clear distinctions in their communications so that they learn to know when to use each of the three elements of intimacy to build relationships, gather information, reassure patients, motivate employees, etc. Help your staff to get comfortable with how to engage patients and referral sources in ice-breaking, friendly conversations. Allow them to practice through activities such as brainstorming creative ways to improve internal and external customer service. The key here is to get them talking.

***Let your patients know that you are proactively working to make your practice a place they can come home to.***

It is very important to help them to learn how to redirect conversations so that they can easily shift through all three elements of intimacy. Remember, intimacy doesn't take time—it takes focus.

### **Step 5: Educate Your Patients**

Once you feel confident that your team is effectively enacting a Culture of Intimacy, it's time to let your community know about it. Market your culture change to your community through community lectures and small group “lunch-and-learns.” Use that time to ask people what they really want from their medical providers. Be sure to elicit the three elements of intimacy. Ask them questions and encourage their involvement in creating a practice that will be right for them. Send feedback summary letters of these meetings out to your patient population; let your patients know that you are proactively working to make your practice a place they can come home to.

### **Step 6: Reward Your Team**

If you want your team to keep the Culture of Intimacy alive, you must continually recognize and compliment people for using the communication techniques, for focusing on people, and for displaying a commitment to building relationships. Remember, they will do what you do. So, above all else, you must always show your commitment to listen to them, to find out what they really want, and to help them to achieve their goals.

Is it worth the effort? Yes. ■