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Untangling the lines

Regional systems take steps to keep communication flowing across the miles.

SIZE IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN ADVANTAGE for large healthcare systems. But for some regional systems with multiple facilities scattered across hundreds of square miles, much of that advantage can be compromised if the lines of communication become tangled.

Poor communication in large healthcare groups can foster the perfect environment for confusion or even distrust. Catholic Healthcare Partners, a 31-hospital system based in Cincinnati, but with facilities in Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, looked for ways to improve its communication and boost management effectiveness as the system expanded. "We thought we were doing pretty well, but the system grew from \$1 billion to \$4 billion [revenue] in six years, and we felt there were things we could do better," says Jane Crowley, executive vice president.

One significant change was the structure of executive management meetings. "The time we spend together is very precious, so we've learned how to be more effective," says Thomas Urban, president and CEO of Mercy Health Partners Southwest Ohio Region and senior vice president of CHP. Urban says system president and CEO Michael Connelly clarifies each agenda item's decision-making process, which "gives us clarity around the discussion." The group relegated lengthy presentations and reports to premeeting preparation, and now schedules lengthy strategic discussions in advance.

In addition, the system copied from the corporate world, giving top executives both corporate and regional titles, job descriptions and performance goals. The system also uses coaches to train top leaders on good meeting techniques and conducts biannual assessments of inner-system relationships.

Once some of the practical issues of communication are resolved, some attention should be paid to the human dynamics, experts say. Lack of communication may lead to turf battles within large healthcare systems, says Michael O'Brien, founder and president of the O'Brien Group, an executive coaching firm in Cincinnati. "If different viewpoints don't get included, one side wins and the other loses. This sets up power struggles where the losing side gathers resources for the next confrontation," he explains.

In evaluating their system's communication structure, CHP executives learned one fundamental tenet: Good inter-system communication requires immediate action. "It's a mistake to think any conflict will just go away," says Crowley. "To fix it is hard work, but it's not harder than putting up with the frustration, stress and lost productivity from staying in the same place."

—GINA ROLLINS



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