

Teamwork Training to Improve the Healthcare Environment

Population-based research suggests that in the United States between 44,000 and 98,000 patients die each year from preventable errors, making medical errors the eighth most common cause of death. Effective teamwork and communication are among the most effective error-management techniques, and they also have several positive side effects, such as fewer and shorter delays, and increases in morale, job satisfaction, and efficiency. Traditionally, healthcare has not expended much energy training staff to function effectively as teams; the training that is provided today is voluntary, primarily targets non-physician caregivers, and is provided on a limited basis. As a result, professionals are primarily educated regarding their technical skills, with the assumption that teamwork will occur as a natural outgrowth. In addition, there are few incentives to promote teamwork in terms of training programs, reward and recognition programs, and performance evaluation systems.

Addressing the need for formal training for clinicians in this area is imperative. Unlike other high-risk industries, healthcare has made little progress in developing standard methods for communicating critical information among team members. This lack of clarity, in combination with individual differences in communication styles, can damage professional relationships and respect for one another. Additionally, the risk of potential patient errors increases with ineffective communication.

Patient error data reveals that many of the care team situations that lead to errors are the result of poor teamwork among staff across disciplines and position hierarchies. Examples of team-related communication behaviors that increase risk of patient care errors include: failure to inform team members of a patient's problems, failure to discuss alternative procedures, failure to plan for and communicate contingencies, failure to monitor situations and other team members' activities, and overt hostility and frustration, which may result from fatigue, complexity, workload, and so forth (Helmreich, 2000).

Current research supports the use of team training, particularly concerned with communication, to reduce patient care errors. Employees need a collaborative process that utilizes everyone's observations, expertise, and ideas. They also need methods for handling conflict and building relationships among team members.

Rather than one solution for all hospitals, we suggest that hospitals select alternatives that best meet their needs and constraints.

Approach	Description	Complexity/Effectiveness	Expense
Initiate or expand team skills training to offer to all disciplines, in mixed discipline groups	Short, focused training programs on specific team skills	Moderate/ Moderate	Moderate if hospital already has purchased team skills curriculum
Initiate or expand team skills training to offer to all disciplines, in separate discipline groups	Short, focused training programs on specific team skills	Low/ Low-moderate	Moderate if hospital already has purchased team skills curriculum
Guest Speaker	Respected researcher presents data basis for improved teamwork & describes key team skills	Low/ Moderate	High
Intensive team building for each unit	Focused team skills and team building sessions that would help interdisciplinary teams get to know their own strengths and concerns and improve teamwork	High/ High	High