



Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative

Reprinted from *PRHI Executive Summary*, May 2003

Naida Grunden, editor

Excellence as a habit

Study takes on “real” dimension at UPMC Northwest

On March 20, employees at UPMC Northwest in Franklin were “in class,” studying the Harvard Case Study on Alcoa. The study explores how Alcoa became the safest workplace in the United States, reducing its lost work-day rate from 6 to 0.15 per 200,000 hours worked. (Currently, American hospitals share an abysmal rate of 3.3.)

Adding his personal observations to the study was Paul O’Neill, former Alcoa CEO and Treasury Secretary, and Chairman of PRHI’s Leadership Obligation Group. Mr. O’Neill described the way the Alcoa findings could be applied to health care for patients *and* workers.

What kind of leadership does it take?

Making a quantum leap in safety requires leadership from top to bottom. It involves attention to detail in an inverted hierarchy: leaders aren’t ensconced in offices, but are usually out among the workers, helping them solve problems.

When every simple mistake is viewed as waste, it’s easy to see how healthcare costs quickly multiply. If the incredible talent of every nurse were unleashed 100% of the time, for example, instead of squandered in “hunting and gathering,” an enormous amount of waste would fall out of the system. More important, patients would receive more and better care.

Disarming the excuses

Often, the first reaction from leadership is a long string of reasons why improvement cannot be achieved. Chief among them are: “Our patients are sicker;” “We’re different;” “We already have programs in

place;” “We are working as hard as we can;” and “Our results are as good as anyone else’s.”

Once leaders realize where their real baseline is, and how much improvement is possible, they can be persuaded to find ways to make quantum leaps. When the change comes, starting from the very top of the organization, and when people are permitted to develop solutions in their own areas, they become excited and “own” and accelerate change. Every success must be celebrated.

“Free lessons”

The sole difference between a near miss and a disaster is luck, so information about near misses is incredibly valuable. Airline accident investigators refer to near misses as “free lessons,” and we can learn from every one of them.

Most system improvements do not necessarily require capital investment or the latest high tech innovation. Some of the best solutions are simple and don’t cost money. The most earth-shattering change is in thought processes.



At UPMC Northwest, L-R: (L-R) UPMC Northwest board chairman **Ned Cowart**, PRHI LOG chair **Paul O’Neill**, UPMC Northwest board members **Keith Pemrick** and **James Knarr**, UPMC Northwest chief executive officer **Neil Todhunter**, and PRHI director **Ken Segel**.

Photo by Christian Porter, courtesy UPMC Northwest

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—PAUL O'NEILL

Changing systems in a dramatic way means imparting on every worker the freedom to think of ways to do it better; to be treated with dignity and respect; to have their work be a meaningful contribution to their lives; and to have their hard work noticed.

Regional data point the way

One major advantage of the PRHI consortium is the ability to have enough data to learn together from common root causes and solutions.

“Medical care institutions and providers must never ever seek to win competition by holding back information that could help one another’s patients,” Mr. O’Neill told the UPMC Northwest workers.

“This is not an overnight thing,” he added . “If it were easy, it would just take a memo.” ☞

