



Reinvigorating a Team. Revitalizing a Culture.

ProHealth Care enlisted Empathia to assist in a crucial cultural transformation.

Success may breed success but it also creates its own set of challenges. Just ask the members of ProHealth Care's Information Technology (IT) team.

As growing numbers of Waukesha area residents flocked to the community-based health care system, the workload surged for the IT department. To their credit, the team members did what all good soldiers do. They soldiered on—but not without problems. Communication and courtesy, for instance, began to suffer in the rush to meet deadlines and get the work done. That didn't sit well with the once-cohesive team. In fact, during ProHealth Care's Employee Engagement Survey, the team members expressed concern regarding their own interaction and professional behavior.

The IT team's senior management moved quickly to address these concerns. Partnering with Empathia, a national behavioral health organization, they took a series of steps to improve the IT team's workplace culture. First, they developed a Code of Conduct Team to shape protocols for interpersonal behavior. While this was a good start, they wanted to

change the workplace dynamic even more. As a result, they partnered with Empathia to develop and launch a department-wide “Key Conversations” training initiative focused on improving the interpersonal, communication and conflict resolution skills of IT team leaders and members alike.

Of course, measuring the potential impact of these initiatives was every bit as crucial as launching them.

The Importance of Benchmarking and a Sound Methodology

ProHealth Care was particularly interested in utilizing Empathia’s scientifically validated Culture Assessment Tool (CAT). “When we saw the questions the CAT asks and the way it tracks and categorizes employee responses, we knew it would serve us much more effectively than other survey and measurement tools we had seen,” said Christine Bessler, Chief Information Officer and Vice President of Information Technology at ProHealth Care. “We were impressed by Empathia’s sound methodology for dealing with cultural issues.”

The CAT’s benchmarking capabilities were equally impressive, according to Tom Ostrenga, Manager of Business and Financial Systems. “The CAT gave us the ability to survey the IT team to gather baseline readings on a variety of key parameters— leadership, health and wellness, engagement and others—*before* we launched the Key Conversations training. Then it gave us readings of the same parameters after the training took place. So there was no guesswork. We knew for certain whether or not the team made progress. And we knew exactly where the progress had taken place or where more was needed.” Ostrenga called the CAT a cultural barometer that delivers statistically valid insights.

These insights proved critical for the IT team leaders, who needed to gauge whether their strategies were working and generating positive results. In fact, six months after the Key Conversations Training took place, the CAT showed that the IT team demonstrated statistically significant improvement in 14 of the 28 areas measured, and there were no areas with lower scores. The three measures showing the most significant improvement included:

- Employees taking healthy work breaks.
- Leaders and managers “pitching in” when deadlines were tight or workloads were heavy.
- The organization holding events that created fun times together.

Some other areas showing improvement related to the Key Conversations initiative included:

- Managers addressing poorly performing employees in a timely manner.

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- Employees showing respect for different points of view in a disagreement.
- Employees coaching each other.
- Employees addressing conflict with each other directly.
- Employees being accountable to each other for getting things done.
- Employees recommending their organization as a good place to work.
- Employees laughing in a genuine and appropriate manner.

The CAT also revealed an overall uptick in the group’s resiliency, despite continuing change and uncertainty in the workplace.

An additional advantage of working with Empathia, noted Bessler and Ostrenga, is that the company didn’t merely provide a survey and an assessment tool. Empathia also helped ProHealth Care communicate with the IT team, explaining why it was conducting the survey, what the goals were, and how the whole process would unfold.

Despite the sophistication underlying the survey, Empathia made participation fast and easy for the IT team. This was essential to ProHealth Care because it didn’t want the already busy team burdened with a lengthy or overly complex survey. The goal was to gather solid baseline data in the most efficient way possible, said Bessler, and Empathia accomplished that perfectly.

“Using an external partner and a unique tool like the CAT also sent a strong message to the team that we were taking this matter very seriously—and that we were committed to making measureable improvements,” Bessler added.

Jon Wisniewski, Senior Network Engineer, felt that the IT Team received the Empathia survey more favorably than other surveys they had taken because of its unique angle. “This survey wasn’t just asking standard questions about how we feel about the organization. It was more about how do we feel about each other and our workplace atmosphere. That’s very different.”

A Team Is Reinvigorated.

Once the Key Conversations training launched, ProHealth Care’s IT department began confronting its issues openly. “The training actually forced people to play out various scenarios that demanded improved interaction and communication skills,” Bessler said. “After some practice, the team was much better at recognizing real-world opportunities to use these skills and putting them to use. We also saw the department’s leaders becoming more accomplished at modeling desired behaviors and skills.”

Ostrenga agrees. “There’s been a significant improvement in the way the team members relate to and collaborate with one another. It’s most notable when the team is faced with a challenging situation. Everyone meets these situations with a lot less turmoil and they work through the challenges so much more efficiently.”

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In Wisniewski’s estimation, the process was an overall win-win for everyone involved. “There has been a definite shift in the culture from the time we started the training to the present,” he said. “I think the team uses the training and I think we understand how to work with each other better.”

Both Bessler and Ostrenga have witnessed an invigorated spirit of cooperation and support among the IT team since completing the Key Conversations training. “They’re more ready and willing to have these kinds of fruitful conversations and use the powerful communication techniques they’ve learned,” Ostrenga observed. “The training has given them greater confidence as individuals and as teammates.”

Wisniewski felt that the training was useful for leadership as well. “Leaders use the same communication and conflict resolution tools that we were given. It’s a great way to lead by example. And it creates a stronger culture in your organization if these kinds of behaviors are modeled from the top down.”

Thanks to the CAT’s unique ability to illuminate the full spectrum of workplace culture issues, ProHealth Care was able to see beyond the communication gaps alone. “Lots of things affect a team’s performance, and the CAT helped us identify other important areas that needed attention,” Ostrenga said. For example, the team learned that almost everybody needed to take better care of themselves and their health. They also discovered the importance and benefits of caring for one another as individuals—not just as colleagues. “Empathia really helped us see all of these issues in the proper perspective.”

As for the IT department’s future, Bessler said that ProHealth Care plans to continue communicating regularly with the team regarding cultural issues. “We learned that culture matters a lot! People love to love the place they work, and they love to love the people they work for and with. Culture and communication are ‘softer’ elements among the hard realities of business. But they mean so much.”

She also said ProHealth Care is working with Empathia to sustain the IT team’s progress through a series of refresher courses around cultural, communication and leadership issues. “And we’re going to continue carefully monitoring the issues we’ve already benchmarked.”

Ostrenga believes that many organizations overlook the importance of cultural matters. “Culture is the foundation. It’s the engine we build our businesses on. If you have a healthy culture, you can accomplish your business objectives and sustain the highest levels of success. But you can’t do any of that if your culture is dysfunctional.”

Just ask the members of ProHealth Care’s IT department. Thanks to some timely training and a little assistance from Empathia, they’re functioning beautifully and firing on all cylinders.

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About ProHealth Care: ProHealth Care is a community-based health care system that offers a full range of services, from fitness and wellness services to primary care and specialty care, hospital care, rehabilitation care, home and hospice care—and more. The organization is dedicated to serving residents of Waukesha County and surrounding areas with the highest quality care to promote a healthier community. For more information, visit www.prohealthcare.org.

Empathia provides behavioral health solutions that improve the well-being, safety and productivity of organizations and individuals. The company collaborates with private and public sector entities from expansive Fortune 500 corporations to small businesses in addressing a diverse range of needs: employee assistance, disaster response and planning, workforce well-being, employee relations, leadership development, training and benefits support. Founded in 1982 under the name NEAS, Empathia has distinguished itself as a quality leader dedicated to creating a superior customer experience for both client organizations and employees. For more information, visit www.empathia.com.

Empathia, Inc. | Waukesha, WI | Madison, WI | Westlake Village, CA | San Diego, CA | 866-332-9595