

What's Love Got to Do with Health Care? Everything, Says Christiana Care CEO

By Diana Mahoney

When family medicine physician Dr. Janice E. Nevin became president and CEO of Christiana Care Health System in 2014, she knew the surest way for the Wilmington, Delaware–based independent academic medical center to successfully keep pace with the changing health care landscape would be to engage the entire workforce in the effort. She also knew that achieving the necessary level of engagement across the system's hospitals, home health and rehabilitation facilities, and network of primary care physicians would take something special. That something special, she would soon realize, was love.

"I have always been intrigued by the ideas of empathy, courage and gratitude in health care, but it wasn't until I heard Dr. Peter Pronovost of Johns Hopkins use the word 'love' in his keynote address at the 2015 Press Ganey National Client Conference that I realized how important, and underappreciated, that emotion is in the delivery of safe, effective, patient-centered care," Dr. Nevin said.

According to Dr. Pronovost, "micromoments" of love—a light touch, a gentle smile, a caring conversation, between caregivers and patients and among caregivers and colleagues—provide the key to unlocking a positive patient experience.

This notion resonated strongly with Dr. Nevin, so after working with her team to create and put in place a new strategic plan for the organization, "it seemed to me the next obvious step was to invest time in revisiting our values and behaviors" and, ultimately, injecting love into them, she said.

The objective was not to fix a culture that was broken, but to fortify an already strong one to withstand the effects of the health care storm.

"We have always been a really good organization, we were financially strong and we were getting great recognition for the quality of care and the patient experience we provided," Dr. Nevin said. "But we're also an organization that has always believed we can be better, so we saw this as an opportunity to do things differently."

Further, realizing that the escalating level of uncertainty in health care would undoubtedly translate into downward pressure on revenue, "we had to prepare our workforce to be ready for that and for the kind of gritty response needed to be successful," Dr. Nevin explained.

With this in mind, a comprehensive values and behaviors assessment was undertaken across the Christiana Care system, starting with the senior leadership team. "History has shown that organizations that thrive in periods of change have one thing in common: a deep understanding of their core values, and those values are engrained in everything they do," Dr. Nevin said. "So in the summer of 2016, we challenged ourselves with the strategic goal of defining the values and behaviors that will enable us to create an exceptional experience for the people we serve and for each other. The process itself was as important as the values we sought to define. We communicated and challenged ourselves in ways that we never tried before, inviting engagement and discussion at every level of the organization."

The exchanges were thoughtful, although sometimes heated, Dr. Nevin said. What came through loud and clear, she noted, was that the workforce as a whole "has a tremendous passion for excellence and a commitment to improving the health and well-being of the community we serve."

AT A GLANCE

- In 2016, Christiana Care Health System adopted new core values—excellence and love—and 10 corresponding behaviors to guide caregivers in the mission to create an exceptional experience for the patients they serve and for one another.
- Ambassadors at all levels of the organization have been tapped to help integrate the core values and behaviors into day-to-day activities throughout the health system.
- Every meeting, from CEO roundtables to management meetings, begins with a values and behaviors callout recognizing an individual or team that has demonstrated what the core values look like in practice.

What also emerged was a new value statement: “We serve together, guided by our values: excellence and love.”

At the beginning of the exercise, “I might have predicted that we would include the word ‘excellence’ in the statement; I wouldn’t have anticipated that we would end up with ‘love.’ But the word is truly reflective of the people who are Christiana Care. It really emerged from them,” Dr. Nevin said. “As you can imagine, there was a lot of interesting conversation at the beginning, and even some discomfort, about using the word ‘love’ to characterize our values and relationships, but what it came down to was that, even if you’re really good, you’re not going to be able to get where you want in terms of quality, safety and overall performance unless you embrace both excellence and love. When a patient tells you that you made them feel loved, you know you’ve hit it out of the park.”

In addition to adopting excellence and love as core values, Christiana also introduced 10 corresponding behaviors.

- We commit to being exceptional today and even better tomorrow.
- We seek new knowledge, ask for feedback and are open to change.
- We use resources wisely and effectively.
- We are curious and continuously look for ways to innovate.
- We are true to our word and follow through on our commitments.
- We anticipate the needs of others and help with compassion and generosity.
- We embrace diversity and show respect to everyone.
- We listen actively, seek to understand and assume good intentions.
- We tell the truth with courage and empathy.
- We accept responsibility for our attitudes and actions.

The mission shared with every associate in the organization was that “it’s up to us to make these behaviors shine through our interactions with patients, their loved ones and each other,” Dr. Nevin said.

What Does Love Look Like?

Dr. Nevin and her senior leadership team want to make sure everyone at Christiana Care knows what it means to embrace love as a value. To this end, every meeting—from CEO roundtables to management meetings—begins with a values and behaviors callout, where someone shares something they have witnessed over the previous week “that is a clear demonstration of our values and behaviors in action,” Dr. Nevin explained.

One recent callout recognized the efforts of staff in the chemotherapy infusion unit. “We use virtual reality to help cancer patients relax while they are receiving their infusions. There are some fairly standard scenes—the rain forest, the lake. When one patient in particular was really struggling, the team asked her about her favorite places. She told them that Cape May, New Jersey, was her happy place. Of their own volition and with their own resources, the team went to Cape May and, using a 360-degree camera, filmed scenes from the beach, which they had waiting for her the next time she came in for chemo,” Dr. Nevin said. “That patient most definitely felt loved and cared for.”

Another example was the decision by a young member of the nutrition staff to drive to North Philadelphia to get a week’s worth of prepackaged kosher meals for one patient with significant food issues who was not eating much while she was in the hospital. “Although we were able to provide kosher meals for her, she was struggling. This nutrition team member found out that she regularly received food from the North Philadelphia store and got her what she needed to fuel her recovery,” said Dr. Nevin. While these are extraordinary examples, simple acts—providing a warm blanket to a patient who seems cold, stopping by a patient’s room to say good night at the end of a shift—go just as far toward making patients feel loved, she noted.

The new values framework also empowers caregivers to speak up when they witness a situation in which someone's behavior is inconsistent with the spirit of working together guided by excellence and love. "I occasionally hear from people who may have witnessed an interaction or behavior that didn't live up to our values—maybe they heard hurtful words or witnessed a caregiver not providing the level of respect the patient deserved," Dr. Nevin said. "Because we've got this construct, it gives them the courage to speak up and get a response from the staff about how to have the right conversation."

One key to the success of the values integration process has been the development of an ambassador program, through which the entire organization had the opportunity to nominate valued colleagues to serve as ambassadors for their unit or work area. "We thought we would get 150 or so nominations, but we ended up with 400, and we kept them all," Dr. Nevin said. "I heard over and over from people that they were grateful to be included. It was magical to see people from all levels of the organization—physicians, nurses, IT, environmental services—intermingling and sharing their perspectives."

And while the first wave of ambassadors were involved in developing and disseminating the values and behaviors, "we now have a new group of ambassadors whose job is to engage the caregivers in their respective areas by talking about what the behaviors look like in action," Dr. Nevin said. The goal is to "infect" the entire culture with the values and behaviors. "It's not just the people we employ. We want this to be reflected in our board members, our volunteers, physicians who are in private practice, who are on staff," she explained. "When people walk in the door, wherever they are—one of our hospitals, a small practice, a lab or a warehouse—they should feel like they are at Christiana Care and have the same sense of being valued and loved."

Although it's too soon to tell whether the new values and behaviors initiative has translated into measurable improvements in patient experience and caregiver engagement, "we have seen increases, and we'd like to think it's the beginning of a trend," Dr. Nevin said.

In the meantime, the organization is conducting regular pulse surveys of the workforce to get an understanding of how the effort is being experienced, and it has initiated a new body of work called "Make It Stick" that builds the values and behaviors into recruitment and retention efforts. "It's very important that we continue to be intentional about making sure these values and behaviors show up in a structured way so that we have a workforce that is strong and aligned with what we're doing," said Dr. Nevin.

And while the focus of the efforts has primarily been on the relationships between caregivers and patients and among caregivers and colleagues, "it also provides a framework for us to talk about partnering with the community, particularly as we are going down the road of population health and really embracing the need to address social determinants in ways that maybe we've thought about in the past but which now have become more central and imperative," Dr. Nevin said. "'We serve together' becomes a mantra—a way of expressing the importance of our relationship with the community."

Through this work on values and behaviors, "we have had the unique opportunity to redefine who we are as an organization, embrace the best of what we've achieved and create new ways to make a positive impact on the people we serve," Dr. Nevin said. "My experience working through this process is that while we are exceptional today, we'll be even better tomorrow."