Multifunctional Staff Focus Groups as a Tool to Improve Employee Engagement of Clinical Trials Office Staff

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1. Background

Clinical Trial Offices (CTO) encounter common issues with low employee engagement and high employee turnover. This can impact the quality of the research as well as causing a financial strain on the organization because of the cost of onboarding and training new staff. Many health care organizations have started to measure employee engagement and to prioritize measures to improve employee engagement scores. The Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute (KCI) began measuring employee engagement on a yearly basis in 2016 utilizing a standardized survey. Despite several initiatives in 2017, the scores remained lower than desired. The KCI leadership team, including the CTO leadership, was charged with forming focus groups within their departments.

2. Goals

The goal of the focus groups was to encourage staff to take ownership of their department's employee engagement scores and culture, identify key issues affecting the staff's engagement scores, and develop plans that could be implemented by the staff to mitigate these issues. The ultimate goal of these groups was to improve annual employee engagement survey scores.

3. Solutions and Methods

In March 2018, the KCI CTO formed three focus groups consisting of 8-10 staff members each that included representatives of multiple departments involved in implementing clinical trials. The Vice President (VP) CTO identified three staff members who were high performers and "unofficial leaders" of the staff and approached them about leading these groups. Each manager or supervisor within the CTO provided the names of high-performing staff and this list of members was divided to form the three groups with broad representation. The areas represented included study coordinators, regulatory coordinators, research nurses, network sites, administrative, pre and post-award, and research informatics. The focus group leaders were provided with training by the VP CTO and were introduced to the group members. The initial meeting consisted of a "start-stop-continue" exercise to initiate discussion. The groups were tasked with choosing an area of concern to focus on and develop potential solutions. All three groups chose to work on improving communication and met every 2-4 weeks.

4. Outcomes and Future Directions

The focus groups began meeting in March 2018. The groups brainstormed several methods to improve communication and employee engagement. The ideas were presented to the VP CTO for approval and were then implemented. Some of these solutions included the development of: a CTO activities committee, a monthly newsletter (attached), and an anonymous electronic suggestion box for staff to submit their suggestions. The three CTO focus groups were recognized as some of the most active and successful at KCI. The CTO employee engagement survey scores were compared between 2017 to 2018.
The employee engagement category stayed essentially stable from 2017 to 2018, 3.62 to 3.61 on a 5 point scale. However, communication skills improved from 3.16 to 3.30. In addition, the overall employee experience score improved from 3.87 to 4.00. Based on the 2018 survey results, the groups are focusing on career development in 2019. The first initiative has been to have an educational session for the staff about SoCRA and ACRP certification.