How a Culture of Kindness Can Improve Employee Engagement and Patient Experience – and Five Ways to Get There

Shannon Landry, RN, BScN, MN
Chief Nursing Executive
Bluewater Health
Sarnia, ON

Kathy Bisson, RN, BScN
Co-Chair of the Culture of Kindness Employee Council
Bluewater Health
Sarnia, ON

Colleen Cook, Honours BA, CHRP
Director, Human Resources and Occupational Health & Safety
Bluewater Health
Sarnia, ON

Linda Morrison, RNA, RN, BA
Director, Organizational Development
Bluewater Health,
Sarnia, ON

Abstract
Aware of the evidence demonstrating how important employee engagement is to patient experience, outcomes and cost containment, leadership at Bluewater Health, Sarnia, was looking for strategic solutions to improve engagement. Work with compassion fatigue and resilience specialists suggested focusing on kindness. This article shares the hospital’s experience designing and implementing their campaign – from a core committee that empowers and encourages teams to find their own creative ways to promote kindness, through to leadership’s commitment to changing organizational culture. There’s even a treat cart! Bluewater Health’s employee engagement solution has an aspect of fun that is fresh and innovative.
Introduction
Kindness is increasingly recognized for its role in employee satisfaction. Kindness makes life at work easier without requiring money, training or even a lot of effort, and for staff experiencing stress or burnout in their work, a little kindness can go a long way (Jazwiec 2009).

This has the potential to positively affect patients. Most healthcare organizations are dedicated to the Triple Aim: improve the health of the population, improve patient experience and reduce costs. In recent years, the effect of employee engagement (or burnout) on all aspects of the Triple Aim has been documented. The title of Bodenheimer and Sinsky’s 2014 paper says it aptly, “From Triple to Quadruple Aim: Care of the Patient Requires Care of the Provider.”

This paper is a look at the activities undertaken since January 2017 to create a “culture of kindness” at Bluewater Health (BWH) and the results to date for employees and patients. Nurses have been important catalysts in the drive to create a culture of kindness and the key to its development and implementation, but the process has been inclusive from the beginning, engaging all healthcare workers and staff.

BWH is an innovative community hospital system with two campuses in Sarnia and Petrolia, committed to improving patient experience. To this end, several years ago, leadership created a composite patient, “Emily,” who is considered in all organizational decision-making: “How will this affect Emily?” is a consistent refrain, and leadership is constantly looking for ways to improve Emily’s health and experience at the hospital.

Two years ago, when BWH participated with other healthcare organizations in a biennial survey through NRC Health, BWH leadership was not satisfied with the level of employee engagement and especially the level of trust that they discovered. The hospital had previously gone through job cuts, which decreased morale and increased stress and distrust. Team dynamics, although still cohesive, showed stress and tension during these times.

For the sake of both employees and patients, leaders were determined to act to make improvements. Compassion fatigue and resilience specialists suggested that implementing strategies such as a focus on strengthening kindness across teams and with individuals, as well as formal support for employees’ well-being, and resilience, could positively impact BWH staff and patients alike. Work began in early 2017, and five elements have proven key to success.
Engage Leadership
Culture follows leadership, and the BWH CEO was very much on board with this cultural change. Leaders were engaged and committed to “walk the walk,” demonstrating their own participation in the new culture of kindness. In turn, each manager was encouraged to emphasize the new culture of kindness with their team and across teams.

Leadership perceived that relieving staff from worries about job stability or the ability to develop their career through education was, and would be received as, a kind gesture, and a public commitment was made to support staffing and education.

The next step was to extend kindness from management to employees by acknowledging that traumatic or difficult experiences can affect clinicians in a hospital, and encouraging staff to take a time-out or talk something through. The hospital debriefing or “critical incident stress management” process was updated, and employees were educated about the change. Gone are the days of staff being expected to “tough it out.”

Another way leaders have demonstrated kindness is to be more ready to engage staff in caring conversations, asking how they are doing. A culture of kindness and employee well-being was integrated into the curriculum of leadership courses. This results in a difference in how staff feel about the organization and its leadership.

Engage Employees
In parallel with leadership initiatives, the creation of a new culture of kindness also involved staff from the beginning and gave them a central role.

A Culture of Kindness Employee Council was established in the spring of 2017 with enthusiastic volunteers from departments across the hospital, including nurses and other staff. Together, they discussed what kindness meant to employees. From this, the council identified four guiding principles for creating a culture of kindness: dignity and respect, communication, collaboration and a sense of community. Working in small groups, they generated potential activities related to the pillars, evaluated which were most actionable and prioritized the activities. A plan was developed, and activities are now tracked.

Each council member was asked to commit to a random act of kindness each day. Other members of staff began to notice, and momentum began to build. The employee council and management worked together to encourage teams to find their own ways to incorporate kindness.
**Build Dignity and Respect through Acknowledgement**

To support the employee council’s pillar of increasing dignity and respect, the staff have been encouraged to acknowledge and recognize when others have “gone the extra mile” to help colleagues. This recognition can be private or public. Staff and leaders are encouraged to acknowledge their colleagues or direct reports in the moment if possible or as soon as possible. It can be said in-person, by a written note or via e-mail. One council member reports that many nurses may feel that their leaders do not realize all the work they are doing. Being acknowledged demonstrates that a leader not only knows, but also appreciates the work and extra care of a staff member. She recalls that during one very busy period in the intensive care unit, members from a leadership role, within a different department, brought sandwiches for the nurses who were unable to take breaks. The sandwiches were gratefully received as both a practical solution and an acknowledgement of the extra work the staff were doing and the extra care they were providing to their patients.

Acknowledgement has proven to be contagious. Founding employee council co-chair Kathy Bisson reports, “When someone values how you do your work, you take more pride, and you are more likely to go the extra mile.” Staff are also more likely to acknowledge others for their actions and kindness. Bisson also believes that feeling acknowledged makes nurses less resistant to change. Certainly, levels of trust have increased since bringing in a culture of kindness.

**Build a Sense of Community through Inclusion**

Extending acknowledgement beyond nurses to allied health workers and those on other teams has been an important way to address another pillar identified by the employee council: building a sense of community. This demonstrates that their work is valued as a contribution to one big team. In some cases, teams have gone out of their way to recognize teams who work “behind the scenes” at the hospital – including those involved in administration – recognizing the difference their work makes to those who work in patient care.

There are now many new examples of staff going out of their way to include others. Unit bulletin boards that might once have listed only physicians and nurses working on each unit, now typically include allied healthcare workers. A potluck lunch includes all team members. It is more common for new people in all positions to be introduced around the unit and welcomed. Some teams hold open houses to inform other teams about the work they do. Others hold quizzes (“Know Your Teams”) to make learning about colleagues fun. The employee engagement score relating to “Feel I belong to a team” has increased by 3.5%.
Staff are now more likely to help someone from another team. One council member mentions going to another floor to retrieve a piece of equipment. An employee from housekeeping helped her move it – not only to the elevator but right up to her unit. She reports that this is happening more often, that individuals are willing to go out of their way to help someone from another team.

The council surveyed new employees, asking, “How can we be kind to you?” Responses ranged from the expected (“Be patient with me”) to the less predictable (“Tell me what you like about the workplace”). From this, the council developed guidelines for welcoming new colleagues, and it has informed onboarding curriculum.

**Diversify: More Examples of Kindness**

Teams have been given the freedom to develop their own creative, effective – and fun – approaches to kindness, and they have responded, reaching out to colleagues across the hospital:

- Pharmacists are offering “prescription refills” on acts of kindness.
- The Dietary team has a “Random Acts of Kindness Cart” – bringing treats to anyone they see doing something kind.
- Another team gives out “World’s Kindest Person” certificates.
- Volunteers have created “Kindness Rocks,” handing out inspirational sayings written on stones.
- A flash mob from the Culture of Kindness Employee Council danced to the song “Happy” at a leadership retreat to promote the work of the council.
- Teams have added kindness to their team “huddle” bulletin boards, used to post team communications. They include inspiring quotes and heartfelt thanks from patients and families.

**Outcomes**

Kindness is making a difference at BWH. Comparing employee engagement surveys conducted by third-party NRC Health in 2016 and 2018, positive response to the custom question “Culture of kindness promoted” increased from 61.9% to 69.9%. Positive responses for “hospital as place to work” were significantly higher over the two-year period, from 69.8% to 76.3%. Positive responses to the question “Can trust this organization” increased 4.2% in that period.

Many employees report that the culture is changing, and the hospital “feels different.” One council member with 30 years of nursing experience observed, “We used to be like this,” explaining that early in her career, there was more recognition and care demonstrated for colleagues. She perceived this as a return to the core of a
caring profession and a positive result. She also observed, “When I walk down the halls, people smile and say ‘hi’ more than previously. People make eye contact with everyone.” This member contrasts a very different feeling at a hospital visited in another Ontario city. There was no eye contact for visitors, nor between staff members, and the experience was less friendly and kind.

Patient experience scores have been affected positively as well. They went from 47% to 55% for emergency department patients and from 66% to 73% for general hospital patients. All of these metrics demonstrate significant improvement in a short time in areas that are often difficult to change. It demonstrates the effectiveness of focusing on kindness to create a better environment for staff and patients too.

**Ongoing**

Leadership and employee council members continue to be very invested in continuing to develop a culture of kindness. This support includes members of the board, as its Quality Committee monitors the kindness indicator and reports at monthly board meetings. The Culture of Kindness Employees Council still has many action items to undertake, but the difference in culture can already be felt and measured.

Yet, because it takes years to make a permanent cultural change, challenges remain in sustaining widespread interest in the middle term, while convincing some employees that the change in culture is sustainable. Bisson, for one, believes it will be, and welcomes a lasting change: “You spend so much time at work, why not be happy?”

Leadership knows that kindness is the beginning of the organization’s journey, but is confident that, as noted by James R. Doty, “The act of kindness ripples out and makes it more likely that your friends and those around you will be kinder. It is a social contagion that puts our society right.”

**References**

