



# Developing Skills and Leadership of *Every* Employee

**CHANGING CARE AND DEVELOPING TALENT AT UNITYPOINT HEALTH-DES MOINES.** BY RANDALL WILSON, PhD

**S**eismic shifts are rocking health care from all sides: consolidation and mergers, changing technology, an aging workforce poised to retire and above all, the demands of the Affordable Care Act requiring our health care organizations to treat more than 16 million previously uninsured health consumers seeking care,<sup>1</sup> bring down the rate of growth in health care spending,<sup>2</sup> and meet new performance standards for better patient experience, reduced readmissions and population health outcomes.

Delivering better care and healthier populations while controlling costs will depend on the leadership exercised in every health care institution – and not just in the C-suite, but also from those working on the frontlines, at patients' bedsides, in clinical labs and physicians' offices, and within homes and neighborhoods where critical health decisions are made. Today's pay-for-performance environment makes every decision, and every staff member, critical to organizational viability and success. More than ever, transforming care means transforming the work environment – in a way that fosters leadership through workforce development at all levels.

Making this connection is not simple. One health care employer, UnityPoint Health (UPH) in Des Moines, Iowa, is leading the charge in aligning care improvement with talent development. In this article, we draw lessons from UnityPoint Health's journey to achieve better care and develop the skills and leadership of

every employee – and to connect the dots between these efforts.

UnityPoint Health-Des Moines (UPH-DM) is one of a growing number of health care employers that have made substantial investments in the skill and career growth of their frontline staff – those who spend the most

time with patients, taking vital signs, bringing meals or changing linens, and registering them into or out of the hospital or clinic. This year UPH-DM was recognized by a group of health care representatives as a Frontline Health Care Worker Champion and a national leader in frontline worker development.



UnityPoint Health was formed in 1993 with the merger of Iowa Lutheran Hospital, Iowa Methodist Medical Center and Blank Children's Hospital. It ranks among the 15 largest nonprofit health systems in the U.S., and the fourth-largest nondenominational system, with a footprint extending to three states and more than 30,000 employees. It employs more than 5,500 in its four Des Moines hospitals; 20 percent of whom are "frontline" positions – not requiring a license or college degree, such as patient care associates or environmental services technicians.

Like many health care providers, UPH-DM is changing the way it delivers care – for instance, by converting all of its 51 outpatient clinics to patient centered medical homes. Its accountable care organization, UnityHealth Partners, holds the system's providers to standards for patient results and reducing costs. UPH is also actively engaged with Des Moines' public health officials in analyzing data at a neighborhood level to sift out determinants of population health. Additionally, it is working actively to break down the silos between hospital, home care, clinic and pharmacy to coordinate care and ensure smooth patient transitions. According to UPH-DM President Eric Crowell, "When we look at a hip or a knee being replaced, we look at 90 days, two weeks before [hospitalization] and two months after, and we treat the whole 90 days of the episode of care. So it requires us to connect home care, physical therapy, pharmacy and reconciliation. We've identified the problem [as] 'we've always defined care as what happens in the hospital,' and now we're taking a more holistic view."

None of these changes in health care delivery are possible without the active support and engagement of the workforce at all levels. It begins from the top. Crowell touts the maxim, "patients second, employees first," citing Paul Spiegelman and Brett Barrett's 2013 publication, *Patients Come Second*.<sup>3</sup> In this view, patient-centered



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—UPH-DM President Eric Crowell

care requires an organization where all are valued, recognized and rewarded meaningfully. When asked what distinguishes the organization, Crowell immediately cites, "HR: how we're investing in leadership [and] talent development."

Engagement in changing health care is also a bottom-up process at UPH-DM. Employees are asked from their first day to look at their job in the light of quality of care measures, their effects on the organization's financial health and on achieving the ultimate bottom line at UnityPoint Health: the best outcome for every patient, every time. At orientation, executives explain the core value of every new hire's position in terms of required measures. For a new environmental services technician, this includes infection control and patient satisfaction – areas where the hospital stands to lose money in the form of penalties. As Chief Nursing Officer Debra Moyer explains, "If I'm a patient service representative and I'm registering a patient, how does what I do contribute to improving quality, reducing cost and improving the patient experience?"

The ideal of "employees first" also undergirds UnityPoint's investments in support of frontline employee growth and advancement. In stages, its Des Moines hospitals have laid a foundation for workforce development, spurred by economic necessity as well as organizational mission. Starting in 2010, UPH worked in partnership with other health care employers in the Des Moines region to respond to high turnover in critical frontline positions, as well as a lack of frontline workers prepared to enter supervisory and managerial roles. It created a

Workforce Training Academy with area health providers and educators to fill vacant direct care and allied health positions, and develop career ladders keyed to specific competencies and occupations. To fill the gap in frontline leadership, UPH initiated Breakthrough to Leadership, a program that trains selected frontline workers in leadership skills. Since its inception, 78 employees have entered the program, and promotions from within for leadership openings has increased from 35 percent to 75 percent.

To respond to turnover, UPH-DM created the position of retention specialist, a role that reports directly to Vice President for Human Resources Joyce McDanel. Prior to creating this role, according to McDanel, UPH "wasn't able to dedicate resources to the career path development for entry-level workers. We didn't have anyone focusing on that." Lacking focused managerial attention, frontline staff development was low on the list of priorities for HR business partners. Retention Specialist Emily Brown was hired and charged with coaching frontline workers on career development, while helping to remove barriers to job retention and advancement. As she explains, "I help people understand not only how their skills relate to the hospital, but also where the hospital is going; what jobs are out there and what jobs their current skill sets fit, what might be additional skills they can build and how they can build those skills."

While the retention specialist role was initially funded solely from a grant, over half of the funding now comes from the hospital's operating budget. Since creating this role, UPH-DM has

“UPH-DM will initiate a pilot for developing community health workers, who, among other roles, will help patients locate services and promote behaviors that will aid in preventing hospital readmission.”



—UPH-DM Vice President for Human Resources Joyce McDanel

made it a priority to track retention in the high-turnover positions targeted for assistance according to Ms. Brown: food service, environmental services, patient care technicians, and similar functions where turnover exceeds 20 percent annually, compared to 14 percent overall. As of December 2014, the turnover rate in departments served by Ms. Brown had fallen below 20 percent, with an annual estimated savings of \$97,500.

UPH-DM's current challenge is to fully align its workforce development initiatives with its business strategies for transforming care. This is occurring on several fronts. Under McDanel's leadership, UPH has been conducting a workforce planning process spanning its hospitals, outpatient clinics and home care providers. Among the key issues: identifying the right mix of staff, with the right skills and competencies, to achieve new standards of care delivery – especially outside the hospital walls. Other critical considerations include defining new and emerging roles to support care coordination and population health, such as patient navigators, and what roles frontline as well as licensed staff can assume.

Transforming care – and transforming the workforce – is a work in progress at UPH-DM. But the considerable progress it has made on both fronts and in connecting the dots

between them, offer vital lessons to all health care practitioners:

1. Prepare for transforming care delivery by building and maintaining an infrastructure to support investment in frontline workforce development.
2. Task senior leadership, such as a HR vice president or chief learning officer, with management and championing of frontline workforce development.
3. Create dedicated staff roles, accountable to senior leadership, for designing and implementing frontline workforce programs, including coaching and instruction of frontline staff.
4. Build the case for frontline workforce investment through collection, analysis and communication of evidence. Select outcome measures targeted to business objectives, including care transformation and financial well-being of the organization.
5. Fully integrate workforce planning and development with organizational strategies for care transformation and financial success.
6. Educate all staff, including frontline workers, on the objectives of care transformation, processes to achieve them, and how these align with their job responsibilities and team roles.

UPH-DM faces challenges that every health care provider in the nation must grapple with: finding a way to deliver care that is more efficient, more satisfying for patients and more effective in improving the health of populations. None of these aims can be realized without a capable and high-performing workforce. What is notable about UPH, however, is its deliberate effort to inform, engage and develop its workforce, including those on the frontlines. Doing so requires a strong executive commitment to employees first, the capacity to invest in frontline workers, and a clear alignment of workforce development and planning with organizational goals and strategy.



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The story of UPH-DM training efforts is told more fully in a case study [[www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/materials/Connecting-the-Dots-070115.pdf](http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/publications/materials/Connecting-the-Dots-070115.pdf)] conducted on behalf of CareerSTAT, a joint initiative of Jobs for the Future and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions to document and endorse the business case for investments in frontline hospital workers based on health care leader recommendations.



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—UPH-DM Retention Specialist Emily Brown