Kaiser Permanente’s Journey to Create a Culture of Learning Explored in December Issue of Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety

(Oak Brook, Ill. – December 1, 2011) Becoming a learning organization is the focus of a new article published in the December 2011 issue of The Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety™. The article is the fourth and final in a series by Kaiser Permanente, which documents its five-year performance improvement journey.


The authors, led by Lisa Schilling, R.N., M.P.H., vice president, National Health Care Performance Improvement and Execution Strategy, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, Inc., Oakland, California, and a member of The Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety’s Editorial Advisory Board, discuss how a health care organization can sustain best-in-class quality performance in a rapidly changing environment. They explain how organizations can develop structures and processes that facilitate the acquisition and sharing of knowledge.

The authors identify six “building blocks” for achieving a learning organization:

- Real-time sharing of meaningful performance data
- Formal training in problem-solving methodology
- Workforce engagement and informal knowledge sharing
- Leadership structures, beliefs and behaviors
- Internal and external benchmarking
- Technical knowledge sharing
According to the authors, putting each building block into place requires multiple complex strategies – all of which combine top-down and bottom-up approaches.

“We encountered challenges at Kaiser Permanente when implementing our strategy to create a system centered on continuous performance improvement. By using the identified building blocks to become a learning organization, we have been able to help our workforce understand how to test, implement and share practices to achieve higher quality care and service. I believe other organizations, by following the same principles, can successfully transition to a learning culture,” says Schilling.

An accompanying editorial, “Building Fundamental Performance Improvement Capabilities: The Kaiser Permanente Experience,” by Kathleen Goonan, M.D., associate in health policy, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, urges readers not to dismiss the Kaiser Permanente series as irrelevant, in view of its integrated delivery structure or vast size, to their own organizations: “Each of these four articles provides a distinctive lens on effective approaches to overcoming challenges that face every health care organization.” The authors provide fundamental lessons and identify common themes about building high-performing improvement capabilities into an organization’s culture and operations.


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