

Curriculum and Training Modules

Hi-Touch Healthcare: The Critical Six Soft Skills

This publication was produced pursuant to grant agreement number 14-326-001. This project was supported by Economic and Workforce Development funds awarded to the Butte Community College District by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

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Health Workforce Initiative

Introduction

Due to rampant changes in the practice of medicine, the landscape of healthcare has become increasingly complex. The medical delivery challenges now faced by the medical profession include changing demographics, new procedures and technologies, patient empowerment, changes in national health policy, and changing professional roles. These changes impact patient care and practitioner well-being. Healthcare leaders recognize these challenges and the need for continuing education to ensure that patients receive the highest quality care (Braithwaite, 2015). Unfortunately, tensions arise as human capital is constrained and strained in the attempt to administer high quality care. For example, the number of primary care professionals is in decline (Dyess, et. al., 2016; Freel, 2012; Schwartz, 2012) while patient demand is on the rise (The U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2016).

Additional challenges include changes in the demographic landscapes of religion, minorities, age, communication preferences, and other socio-economic indicators (Cohn & Cauldron, 2016; Perrin, 2015). These challenges and complexities are the result of our increasingly diverse society. The U.S Census Bureau reports that more than 350 languages are spoken in the United States (cited in Castillo, 2015) while the Institute of Medicine, advises us that ninety million adult Americans have limited health literacy (cited in NIH, 2016).

These challenges are further compounded by the fact that patient illnesses have become more acute and the work environment has become more technical, thus significantly impacting change and complexity within healthcare arenas (Williams-Buenzli, 2015). The delivery of healthcare is changing as “technology—the internet, electronic medical records, even social media” transforms the delivery of healthcare (Phillips, 2015, p. 2). Some practitioners perceive the move from “practicing direct patient care

to spending time behind the computer” to be one that transforms the “patient from a person into an icon or iPatient” (p. 2).

These shifts in the medical landscape further necessitate that healthcare employees work collaboratively to ensure the delivery of high quality care. This awareness has led many schools of medicine, public health, and other health professions “to define core competencies that are essential for success in the interprofessional healthcare context” (Guerin, 2014, p. 38). While “hard skills” have always been emphasized, the increased call for collaboration to safeguard patient health is rooted in the need for healthcare employees to be proficient in “soft skills.” Soft skills are defined here as the cluster of personality traits and behaviors combined with effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills that impact intra-personal and interpersonal relationships. The cluster of soft skills also includes social graces such as personal habits, friendliness and optimism, characteristics related to feelings, emotions, job performance, and career prospects.

Soft skills are central to patient-centered care regardless of an employee’s position within healthcare. The significance of soft skills is found in the Joint Commission’s 2015 report to be among the most frequent root causes of sentinel events. This is grounds for concern because the soft skills competency levels of many healthcare employees do not meet industry expectations. The lack of soft skills competency is further compounded by the transitions faced in the wake of the Affordable Care Act and the increased use of information and communication systems in the delivery of health care. Therefore, it is imperative that all healthcare employees receive the necessary soft skills training to meet industry expectations.

The California Hospital Association, the Health Workforce Initiative (HWI) Statewide Industry Advisory Committee, the Statewide Sector Navigator, and the Regional Deputy Sector Navigators (DSN’s)

have recognized this need and subsequently requested that there be increased attention to the area of soft skills training. In response to this need, the Statewide Sector Navigator wrote and was awarded an Industry-Driven Regional Collaborative (IDRC) – *Acute Need for Embedded Soft Skills* grant from the California Community Chancellor’s Office, in part to develop soft skills training programs for incumbent healthcare workers.

BACKGROUND

In January of 2015, Linda Zorn, the Statewide Sector Navigator, Health Workforce Initiative, facilitated a meeting with the HWI Statewide Industry Advisory Committee and the regional DSN's. At that meeting, focus groups were formed to discuss and determine the specific soft skills required for healthcare workers. The focus groups consisted of both industry and education representatives and led to the identification of a list of 44 soft skills and 11 related themes.

In May of 2015, lead faculty from Butte College developed and presented further refinement of the initial skills lists to be vetted by the statewide DSN's and by industry and education professionals. This resulted in a set of six categories titled *Hi-Touch Healthcare: The Critical Six Soft Skills*. These categories or "competency domains" contain individual modules determined by industry and education to address the soft skills needed to meet industry expectations. This training is based on this collaborative effort and the recognition that education/training is the key to raising the soft skills competency levels of incumbent healthcare workers.

Description

This manual for the *Hi-Touch Healthcare: The Critical Six Soft Skills* training modules is unique in its approach and is grounded in adult learning theory. Taylor and Hamby (2013) explain that medical education in particular needs to be geared towards diverse adult learners because the educational background of healthcare employees can range from a high school degree to postgraduate degrees (p. 1561). Consequently, the development of this manual has been informed by the Knowles Adult Learning framework geared for all adult learners. Each training module 1) explains why the training is important, 2) is adaptable to the needs and expertise of individual trainers, 3) is directly applicable to everyday situations, and 4) provides problem-centered learning based on real-life problems.

Carefully prepared training materials have been developed borrowing from the *Train-the-Trainers* educational model. This model is an effective method for preparing both novice and experienced educators/trainers to meet the training needs identified for their organization. The American Medical Association (2015) introduces the concept of training the trainers particularly well: “It’s not enough to train the workforce; you also have to train the trainer. The training field can change fast, which makes training for trainers crucial.” The University of Chicago reports that effective training manuals should serve a dual training purpose: provide the information and structure necessary for workforce training and facilitate the growth of the trainer. Training manuals that meet this dual purpose support a growth process that leads to continuous quality improvement for both the trainers and trainees by exposing them to new and diverse viewpoints, improving soft skills competencies, enhancing leadership skills, and increasing work satisfaction (p. 5).

In addition to providing the information and structure necessary for workforce training, an effective manual will provide the trainers with the necessary foundation to successfully mentor and facilitate knowledge acquisition. Therefore, it is important that trainers receive training that 1) is embedded in adult learning theory for ongoing flexibility and adaptability of organizational needs, 2) provides content-specific training modules, and 3) promotes the growth of the trainer. The *High-Touch Healthcare: Critical Six Soft Skills* training for incumbent workers has been designed with such intentions in mind.

Goals and Objectives

The *High-Touch Healthcare: Critical Six Soft Skills* training provides the healthcare industry with the background and tools needed to educate employees at all levels of healthcare organizations. Following are the two overarching goals of this manual:

1. Provide the requisite soft skills background and knowledge for novice and experienced educators/trainers to be well-informed and well-prepared to provide soft skills training to incumbent healthcare employees.
2. Enhance the effective and efficient delivery of health care by incumbent healthcare workers through (re)training with the *Hi-Touch Healthcare: Critical Six Soft Skills* modules leading to continuous quality improvement.

User's Guide

The *High-Touch Healthcare: Critical Six Soft Skills* training is divided into six competency domains with corresponding *Grab-N-Go* subordinate independent training modules. *Grab-N-Go* modules allow the trainer to implement as thorough and detailed training as time allows, or to simply use one or two of the many activities—a la carte style! The convenience of the *Grab-N-Go* module design allows the trainer to pick and choose soft skills training topics from among the six competency domains and again to pick and choose specific activities within each independent module.

The six competency domains provide the overall organization for the individual *Grab-N-Go* modules and are intended primarily for the trainers to use as a schema to identify the training needs of their organization. Each independent training module includes a background rationale and an explanation of the need and/or problem that is to be addressed by the soft skills training and the intended outcomes. Trainer preparation information is included in two documents: the individual training documentation and the PowerPoint presentation with associated notes. Each document, as appropriate, includes detailed explanations and procedures for the trainer.

Trainers also benefit from the consistent structure used to organize and present training materials. This design element allows industry educators/trainers to quickly familiarize themselves to the formatting of each of the independent training modules, saving time and increasing confidence with each subsequent module. This format enables industry educators/trainers to easily select the modules that best fit the specific training needs of the healthcare workers in their organization.

The *High-Touch Healthcare: Critical Six Soft Skills* training provides the content and structure necessary for the trainers to raise the soft skills competency levels of incumbent healthcare workers to meet industry expectations and to sustain continuous quality improvement.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all of the professionals who assisted with the development of the Hi-Touch Healthcare curriculum and training modules by sharing their resources and subject matter expertise.

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