

VA Hospital Sees 6841% ROI After SDI Empowers Them to “Self-Medicate” Conflict Pains.

The symptoms were festering and it was shaping up to be a costly one. Recent government funding cuts had forced the downsizing and merger of the billing & coding offices from two different Veterans Administration Medical Centers. Several staff members from both offices lost their jobs and those that were left standing were being forced to work in close quarters with many new people. The result was a toxic combination of grief and culture-shock. Interpersonal problems began to surface immediately and within a matter of months, five people had approached their union representative to inquire about filing Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints against co-workers or managers.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES: FORMAL PROCEDURE VS. D.I.Y.

Past experience showed that costs for administering EEO grievances ranged from \$20,000 (informal) to \$100,000 (formal). Due to the nature of the complaints and the disposition of the parties involved, the union rep estimated that three out of the five conflicts would be filed at the “formal” level while the others would be filed as “informal” complaints. The organization could be facing a cost of at least \$340,000 not including the potential loss of productivity inherent to workplace conflict.

Needless to say, the union was motivated to seek an alternative solution to the problems plaguing this department – and the ideal solution was not hard to find. The Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) had been (and still is) a prominent part of the training



6841%
Return on Investment

program for the union leaders and upper-level management of the Veterans Administration, so it seemed an obvious choice for damage-control within this department. Based on this recommendation, the SDI was a key component of an internal 7 1/2 hour intervention spread over two days. In attendance were 11 employees and 2 managers. The total cost for the program was \$4970 including travel, facilitator costs, materials, and participant down-time.

FULL RECOVERY: FISCAL + PERSONAL

The intervention paid off in more ways than one. The individuals involved in the looming grievance filings were empowered to work through their conflicts on their own. No official complaints were filed — a \$340,000 expenditure avoided. This fact alone translates to a 6841% return on investment.

But if you were to ask the thirteen people who experienced the SDI, you'd hear the results described in a very different way. Suddenly, light bulbs were flashing as they learned to recognize and understand their differences. The room buzzed with comments like “Now, I get it!” “We need to talk a different way.” “No wonder I'm unhappy.” But the crucial success of the SDI training rested in its ability to depersonalize conflict. The infighting that had plagued the

department could now be discussed in a safe, objective way that wouldn't be taken personally. This newfound self-awareness encouraged great dialogue between participants and helped them to understand each other (and their patients) better.

POST-OP

The long-term impact of this one training event has been remarkable. The once dysfunctional department now meets monthly as a group to discuss any issues. They still use the SDI learning and terminology as a common language for discussing interpersonal issues. Concepts like "warranted" and "unwarranted" conflict have become part of their operational culture and team members address each brand of conflict accordingly.

Furthermore, the turnover rate for this department has slowed to well below the organization-wide average. One year after the SDI intervention, only one person had quit their job... not surprisingly, it was the only person who chose not to attend the training. Although no dollar value has been attached to the reduction in turnover, the costs savings are significant.

Every time the facilitators check in with the team, they are greeted with enthusiasm and gratitude. What was discovered over those two days was not about "learning" skills, but about revealing and understanding what was there all along. Participants came to realize that they all really shared the same goal: Provide optimal patient care in a way that maintains their self-worth. There are many ways to treat a malfunctioning department. The SDI just seems to do it in a way that not only heals the problem, but enhances the overall wellness of relationships at the same time. ■

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