Be the Architect of Change

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“Be the architect of change in your organization, not the victim of it,” Dr. Karen Weiner, the CEO of Oregon Medical Group advises. “Too often we let our fear of loss push us into fighting to preserve a dysfunctional status quo. That’s a red flag.” Dr. Weiner, a pediatrician who also serves as a Director of the American Medical Group Association rose to her leadership positions by taking a systematic approach to reducing burnout and promoting satisfaction. She recommends reflection, a data-driven systematic approach, empowered physician leadership, and cooperative work toward discovering the group’s core values.

Unusually, Dr. Weiner’s path to leadership evolved from a decision to cut back on work. After 15 years of practicing primary care pediatrics, she states that, while still enjoying the practice of medicine, she had begun feeling “restless” and had a sense that she needed to be doing more during the second half of her life. She decided to move exclusively to working in the After Hours clinic, covering night and weekends but freeing up her days in order to give herself the opportunity to explore other aspects of life.

“I took a Spanish class, played guitar, and cooked,” she recalls. The additional time for reflection helped her refocus on the second half of her career and consider her options. During that time, while serving as a member of the board of directors of OMG, Dr. Weiner noted that it was becoming clear to everyone that Oregon Medical Group, like many medical organizations across the country, was facing some large cultural issues that needed to be addressed in order to thrive in a changing healthcare industry. The board of directors decided that a full time physician leadership position was needed in order to begin tackling cultural transformation. Dr. Weiner accepted that position and thus began what would become her second career.

When she became CMO, she asked providers to take the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The results were disturbing because they revealed that their burnout rates were above average for the US. Dr. Weiner reports that by simply administering the survey and opening the discussion up about chronic dissatisfaction and burnout, there was a sense of relief. Next steps included expanding physician leadership across the organization, agreeing upon a shared vision, creating a physician compact, identifying “pain points” for the clinicians, and implementing changes that had an immediate positive impact on their experience of practicing medicine.

The results have been astonishing; in the 2013 burnout survey, 38% reported feelings of emotional exhaustion and 11% reported feelings of depersonalization. By 2017, the data showed that only 8% reported feelings of emotional exhaustion and 3% reported feelings of depersonalization. “We aren’t done and everything isn’t perfect, but we have seen a real shift. We have a much higher degree of physician engagement and we no longer struggle to recruit new physicians to our organization,” Dr. Weiner reports. “The culture sells itself.”

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Finally, when she became CEO, she engaged all providers in a search of more relevant core values. The list of 8 core values at that time did not accurately reflect the feelings of most providers and were of limited use in making decisions within the organization. At an all provider meeting, Dr. Weiner asked each person to choose 3 values from a list of 138 possible core values. They then paired up to negotiate 3 values. Then gathered again in groups of 4. The result was 23 values, of which only 11 were listed repeatedly. The board reduced those to three capstone principles – servant leadership, professionalism, and sustainability – that now guide all of OMG’s major decisions.

Dr. Weiner credits her physician executive training with helping her distill her leadership philosophy. The search for her own core values through reflection helped her prepare to guide others. When she became a leader, her willingness to institutionalize a process that included skeptics led to a successful program to reduce burnout. Her advice to physicians is simple - direct necessary changes deliberately rather than seeking to prevent them.