

Central Maine Healthcare Corporation



Central Maine Healthcare Corporation is a 3000-employee integrated healthcare delivery organization. It consists of three hospitals, two nursing homes, and employed physician practices.

Peter Chalke, President and CEO, and Laird Covey, the COO of Central Maine Medical Center, the flagship hospital of the organization, share their story:

Laird explains, “We were interested in developing mid-level managers who have huge potential for future development to the executive level. So Peter and I agreed that an Action Learning approach was the strategy we wanted to use.”

However, when it came time to invest in the project they realized they had a bigger problem they needed to tackle first: a finance performance issue.

Peter shares, “Our bottom line had deteriorated and we were not at all happy with the financial performance of our system. So it didn’t seem like the best

time to go ahead with a leadership development program. But as I thought about Action Learning, my understanding—and this is an oversimplification— was that it’s an intense process where a diverse group of people are challenged to develop themselves as strong leaders while they define, dissect, interpret and ultimately offer solutions for a major problem. So I made the decision to go ahead with it. But rather than conducting it with the mid-level managers as planned, we would have the executive team go through the process with the challenge to get Central Maine Healthcare to a sustainable five percent bottom line.”

With this approach, not only would they solve the biggest problem they were currently facing—the financial performance issue—they would also

gain immediate benefits, including leadership development and team building, from the Action Learning process and be able to extend it throughout the organization.

“As we began,” Laird Covey explains, “the complexity of the financial performance problem was very surprising. I think that actually reinforced one of the fundamental aspects of effective Action Learning. It was a reminder to us that so often you look at a problem through your traditional lens, quickly identify what you think is the cause—based on your twenty or thirty years of experience—then assume you’re on the right track to the best solution.

“I found changing the processes for how you go about solving problems to be the most difficult part of the program,” Laird continues. “Because it’s rote, it’s from memory, it’s habit. In fact, it was easier

for me to observe the ways other people allowed their traditional problem-solving techniques to get in the way of attaining the best result than it was to see this in myself. You don't realize you're doing it. Too often we slip into this fast-paced 'just give me a problem and I'll help you solve it and move forward' mentality because we feel like we don't have the time. But Action Learning forced us to step back and allow for further exploration and a true understanding of the problem.

"Many of us with a very high sense of urgency assume that everyone has the same understanding of an issue and that there is concurrence. So we move on to the next topic—only to realize later that there was a lot of misunderstanding about what we had agreed to. Or we're in a meeting and have preconceived notions about how much value certain individuals will add to the process, so we only half listen to them.

"But with Action Learning, you're forced, through various techniques, tools, and the really effective work of the coach, to at least temporarily stop that process. You learn to stay focused on each step. I've had to become more effective at saying things like, 'Wait. We're not at the point where we're commenting on the merits of this. We'll get there in a minute. All I want to know right now is, do you understand it.' So it makes it complex. It takes time, but it's a very valuable process because your results are better."

The techniques of the Action Learning process evoke better involvement from everyone. Laird explains, "This has three benefits: you get better ideas if you get everyone actively involved; you have a greater chance of getting full buy-in and a feeling of ownership from everyone; and, across the board, I saw better facilitation skills developing among the members of the executive team. The learning that takes place really transcends the program."

Laird firmly believes that the fact Peter Chalke, the CEO, was an active participant

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*Laird Covey, Chief Operating Officer
Central Maine Medical Center*

in the process, submitting himself to the same teachings that others did, was very powerful. Peter himself feels, "It was a tremendous learning experience for me because I've discovered in this process you just can't run everything. You have to let the group come to the conclusion, even though you might have some of the answers up your sleeve. **I've learned that I would rather get 80% of what I want and have 100% buy-in from my team than to get 100% of what I want and have only 50% buy-in from my team.**"

The higher level of trust and respect within the team positions them better to solve future problems, according to Laird. "This comes from being in a process where people are open, vulnerable, and willing to learn. And it really gives you new respect for the unique skills that each person brings—along with a higher willingness to tolerate some of the absurdity that is just going to happen in a work environment."

Laird shares, "We've never experienced this equal blending of learning with solving real life problems. The facilitation of this program was just brilliant. The coaches were wonderfully experienced, knowledgeable, and insightful. They really understood the dynamics of the group and were very agile in terms of adjusting the agenda accordingly. I've talked a lot with all of the participants and every one of them felt that these two Caliper coaches were among the best folks we've ever dealt with in terms of their level of

skill and sophistication in facilitating the process. They were really superb."

Peter Chalke concludes, "It was a very wonderful process and now we have a plan in place we believe will help us achieve the results we want. We've got a lot of energy behind the process as it continues. If we can get the results on the bottom line; take the vice presidents through an Action Learning process and develop a more effective team; and, let the middle managers go through the same kind of project, we can't help but create a win-win situation." ■

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