



The Marathon Continues

How Human Resources Can Guide Organizations Through the Pandemic

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Almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us feel we're not just in a marathon, but in a race where there's no clear finish line. In his book *Run the Mile You're In: Finding God in Every Step*, Ryan Hall, one of the greatest distance runners in recent U.S. history, says, "Suffering is an extraordinary teacher." While the pandemic has certainly brought its share of suffering and challenges, it has also taught us so much, showing us how to be more agile, better stewards of our resources, more compassionate and, well, more human at work. Here's a closer look at some well-being initiatives that we are carrying out for our associates at CHRISTUS Health, as we've aimed to make sure we are capturing the lessons learned and keeping up our endurance to finish the race.

FUEL, REST AND RECOVERY DAYS

These are stressful times. In a 2020 study, the American Psychological Association reported that nearly eight in 10 adults (78%) say the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant source of stress in their lives.¹ And many health care workers have seen an amount of stress that's hard to measure or put into words. Many have felt overwhelmed, discouraged, heartbroken and flat out exhausted — from those battling COVID-19 on the front lines to those working long hours as essential "back office" support. Yet many in health care are so busy taking care of others that we often struggle to prioritize our own needs. That couldn't be truer over the last 24 months. That's why the well-being of our associates has never been more important.

As part of our commitment as a Catholic health care ministry to heal mind, body and spirit, CHRISTUS takes a holistic approach to well-

ness in order to help meet our associates' physical, financial, social, mental and emotional needs. In the early days of the pandemic, CHRISTUS deployed several new well-being strategies, including a "Resiliency Team" that created innovative resources to help members of our workforce feel cared for and supported through a system-wide focus on resiliency and a sense of belonging. Led by our Mission Integration team, we designed a system-wide "Community Building" goal where CHRISTUS leaders were responsible for bolstering belonging and well-being. Leaders went through a series of educational courses — with prayer and reflection, required readings and other content delivered by thought leaders. Leaders then committed to specific actions, based on their respective roles and responsibilities, to enhance both belonging and well-being with their teams.

We also worked to enhance our Employee



Assistance Program (EAP), which includes free counseling for associates and their families. This initiative crossed department lines and involved HR strategy, nursing, mission integration, learning and development, wellness, change management, patient experience and strategic marketing and communications. We envisioned a more proactive program where we made outbound calls to associates to provide spiritual and emotional support and, as needed, connect them with board-certified chaplains. To do so, we turned to one of our call center partners, Stericycle Communication Solutions, which performs clinical outbound calling for visitation follow-ups for our patients.

Through this collaboration, we are working with them to proactively reach out and check in with our clinicians and nursing staff. Together, we designed a brief series of questions and an emotional guidance script that contained a menu of responses, appropriate actions and follow-ups for Stericycle's agents to reference during calls. The program's goals are to provide comfort, and when needed, make a referral to the EAP or a transfer to a CHRISTUS chaplain. This program became known as the CHRISTUS Health Associate Well-being Check-In Program and effectively expanded our EAP offering by providing more personalized well-being checks.

Personalization also includes addressing emotional needs in the moments that really matter. The initial pilot program reached out to associates in Southwest Louisiana — where Hurricanes Laura and Ida made a significant impact — and San Antonio, Texas, where local leaders reported a high level of COVID-19 pandemic-related stress. Altogether, Stericycle made more than 2,000 calls. While the program's efforts were successful in reaching associates who wanted to speak with a chaplain or use the EAP, the campaign also had an unintended result: an overwhelmingly positive reception from colleagues who came away knowing that CHRISTUS leadership cared enough to reach out to them individually. Many associates expressed great gratitude to be a part of an organization that showed concern about their well-being and that, by us simply doing so, they felt better and more connected to the organization. We have now launched this well-being check-in program system-wide, with focus on locations experiencing critical situations. This is just another example of the many ways in which we live out our mission to

extend the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

Well-being initiatives can be a powerful resource to improve engagement, foster resiliency, demonstrate compassion from leadership and help reduce turnover. Our quarterly associate engagement survey scores related to a sense of belonging in the organization and the ability to cope with work-related stress have increased seven points overall since the beginning of the pandemic, with increases up to 14 points in some ministries. I'm confident this is largely due to the intentional work on well-being and resilience.

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As we continue through the pandemic, well-being initiatives must continue to adapt. This was most evident in August 2021, when the Delta variant caused a significant surge in COVID-19 cases. We saw compassion fatigue with many caregivers overwhelmed by the sheer volume of sadness, pain and suffering of patients and loved ones. On another level we saw some members of our care teams feeling resentment toward unvaccinated patients who had to receive inpatient care, taking up precious beds when a vaccination could have avoided hospitalization. Moreover, we saw plain old burnout — from taking on extra shifts to help bridge the gap between staffing shortages and increased patient loads and from the lost hope due to low vaccination rates. We must continue to adjust our well-being resources to be timely and relevant, encourage utilization of EAPs and destigmatize the use of those services.

Furthermore, we must also provide associates tangible structures to support their well-being — giving them individual tools to be resilient and manage their emotional state is not enough. It's like giving someone a blueprint only and expecting them to build an entire house. HR professionals and organizational leaders must create an environment that supports flexible schedul-



ing and the ability to take time off without feeling like you are leaving the team hanging. And, finally, this includes empowering leaders with training on topics such as resilient leadership, communications, change management and empathy. We find this can result in stronger engagement, better performance and productivity and more joy in the workplace.

RUN THE MILE THAT YOU'RE IN

In sports and in life, we want to see a goal met. However, what we are learning as we go through this journey is that it is better to stay in the moment rather than fantasizing about something that is just beyond our reach. Being able to focus on the role you are in, or the task that needs to be accomplished, can provide all of us with a greater sense of control. We all have different roles. We are professionals, partners, parents, children, friends and neighbors — and each one has different pressures. But being able to focus on the role you are in and the task at hand during a particular moment can give one a greater sense of control.²

To better enable this type of understanding and growth, a CHRISTUS mentorship program brings together a diverse group of mentors and protégés across the health system. Participants learn from one another. They are currently taking part in an informal book club to study *The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence From Anywhere in the Organization* by John Maxwell. The premise of the book is that everyone is a leader, no matter where you sit in an organization, as everyone plays an important role. The book explores ways to develop meaningful relationships and influence others at all levels of the organization. This mentorship program is one of our many developmental opportunities that helps us learn to push ourselves.

RECRUIT (AND RETAIN) SOME GOOD RUNNING BUDDIES

In the current job market landscape, the talent pools are tighter. Today, more than 40% of U.S. workers are actively searching for a new job, or plan to soon, according to a new survey report from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).³ In a recent “Washington Post Live” webcast, Anthony Klotz, an associate professor of management at Texas A&M University, credited with coining the phrase “The Great Resignation,” attributed the departures to four

main causes: a backlog of workers who wanted to resign before the pandemic but held on a bit longer; burnout, particularly among frontline workers in health care, food service and retail; “pandemic epiphanies” in which people experienced major shifts in identity and purpose that led them to pursue new careers; and individuals who have embraced working remotely as the new normal and have made the decision to quit instead of going back to the office after remote work ended.⁴

For health care, the pandemic has simply magnified existing staffing shortages. According to a 2021 Talent Trends Report from Mercer, a global health care staffing consultancy, within the next five years, more than 900,000 U.S. nurses will leave the profession, due in part to retirement or “pandemic epiphanies.” Yet the demand for nurses is set to grow. The American Nurses Association predicts employers will need to hire more than 1.1 million nurses by 2026 and still are anticipated to come up almost 100,000 short. Support positions (such as medical assistants, home health aides and nursing assistants) have an even greater gap, as we will be more than 3.2 million workers short in 2026. The following are some ways CHRISTUS HR teams are navigating the “turnover tsunami.”⁵

Total Rewards

In a competitive environment for talented and skilled staff, we need to think beyond compensation; therefore, we are reimagining total rewards. Health care workers, particularly nurses, have traveled to hot spots throughout the pandemic to make significantly more than their pre-pandemic salaries. It’s hard to come back from that. Higher salary expectations, tighter labor pools and aggressive competition both in the health care industry and other businesses — including retail and food sectors boasting wage increases — require us to maximize our total rewards and modernize our associate value proposition.

This incentive goes beyond pay and perks and includes a complete and personalized associate experience. We are looking at what our workforce is looking at, including work/life integration, flexible scheduling, well-being, career growth and recognition. For instance, Gen Xers may be drawn more to a 403(b) match while Millennials may be drawn to our financial well-being benefit program, which provides low-rate student loan

refinancing, educational tools and other financial resources. This is the personalized approach we must continue moving forward.

Fostering Connection

We've also found new value in our connectedness to each other. At CHRISTUS, our relationships are our greatest resource and what I believe carried us during the darkest days of the pandemic. We were able to experience the speed of trust — relying on each other to make decisions quickly. Plus, we experienced a stronger sense of belonging, connected by grief, challenges and shared blessings. Not to mention more than ever before, people were able to bring their whole self to work, both in-person and virtually. However, throughout all the chaos, we found more community. This shifted our work from transactional to transformative and will be critical to engaging talent in the future. We must continue to nurture those connections and create opportunities for leaders to do the same. In other words, human resources must keep our workspaces human.

Optimize Talent

In order to keep pace with increased hiring volumes and attract and engage a full spectrum of talent, we are continuing to further digitize a user-friendly recruitment process. This includes offering flexible schedules, redeploying workforces from low- to high-demand areas to support increased capacity, engaging alternative staff to help associates use personal time and take much-needed time off and ensuring the right skill mix that allows nurses to float to different units to provide care where it is most needed.

Foster Hope for the Future

Studies have shown a strong correlation between hope and workplace engagement.⁶ Hopeful associates are more engaged, have better performance and are more likely to stay. Therefore, in addition to the immediate needs of our staff, leaders should provide them a sense of hope for the future. This includes guarding against having only pandemic-related priorities and continuing to advance long-term strategies, such as leadership development, mentoring programs and diversity and inclusion

initiatives that help colleagues feel seen, heard and valued. These strategies can help produce a greater sense of hope for the future and, in turn, help increase excitement about the future of the organization.

REMEMBER WHY YOU'RE RUNNING

One year after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, Mebrahtom “Meb” Keflezighi became the first American man to win the marathon since the

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early '80s. He had four names scribbled in marker on his race bib corners: Martin, Krystle, Lingzi and Sean. “The four victims that died in the explosion were spectators just like me,” he said to NBC Sports at the time. In his remarks, he noted that he connected with these four names when he felt like he was in no-man’s land during the marathon. He broke off from the pack early, leaving himself alone to conquer tough uphill just outside of the city limits. He says he kept thinking of the post-bombing motto “Boston Strong” and would add in “Meb Strong” as each foot hit the pavement.

All of us have likely felt disconnected at some point during the pandemic. There is so much uncertainty, urgency and need for agility in the present that it's been easy to lose focus on the future and our purpose. But along with the dexterity needed to respond to constant change, we need the stability found in our mission and vision for the future. Therefore, we must help colleagues connect with a larger purpose. At CHRISTUS, we begin meetings with a reflection, which may be a prayer, meaningful quote, scripture or inspirational story. Those reflections have helped us stay connected and to live out our mission. We are very fortunate that Catholic health care is so bonded to God's work. This not only helps us find meaning in our work, but it also helps us continue to be resilient. Isaiah 40:31 tells us “but those who hope



in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint.” If we want to “run and not grow weary,” we must continue to create opportunities to stay rooted in our purpose and celebrate our caregivers’ commitment to the mission.

On October 11, 2021, after being cancelled in 2020 and 910 days on hiatus because of COVID-19, the Boston Marathon returned. Our work does not always have to be the pounding of footsteps like a marathon — it just has to be a pace we set for ourselves, so that we all might be resilient and live out the mission of Catholic health care. We are connecting to our purpose, cheering for our teammates and in doing so, that vision becomes clear. We create innovative health and wellness solutions that improve the lives of individuals and communities so that all may experience God’s healing presence and love.

PACE YOURSELF

It’s important to recognize that rest, recovery and well-being needs to go beyond those providing direct patient care and extend to other support functions, including human resources. The last 24 months have encompassed experiences that some HR professionals may never have dealt with in their entire career if not due to the pandemic: deaths, mental and emotional breakdowns of personnel and the increased demand in the level of care we have to provide. One human resource leader comforted an associate who lost two family members within the same week. I’ve told them that what we’ve accomplished over the last several months is admirable, but not sustainable.

Like performance athletes, HR leaders must put just as much emphasis on rest and recovery time. Recovery days don’t just happen — we must build them into our agendas and make time to take care of ourselves so we can take care of our associates. If you’re not taking care of yourself, you may still be able to provide more support in the short term, but you’re also likely to burn out quickly. You can take care of others more effectively and for a longer period if you’re attending to your own

needs and practicing self-care.

Our HR teams are so dedicated to giving their all to associates by caring for their physical and spiritual needs. It’s no wonder that we often feel our cup is empty. But God gives us this promise: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.” (Psalm 23:5) God loves us so much that he wants our cups to run over, but we must do our part. We cannot pour care into others with an empty cup. The marathon continues.

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NOTES

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Winter 2022, Vol. 103, No. 1
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