Empowered Employees, Better Patient Care

By Robert Grant

All too often issues surrounding Patient Access and healthcare call centers focus exclusively on operational questions: Have we implemented the right technology and telephone system? Do we have too many call transfers? Should we centralize all scheduling? Are our agents hitting their key performance indicators? What's our average handling time?

While these questions are essential and need to be considered carefully — often with the help of experts — an undue focus on operational and technical issues can sometimes obscure the human relationships that are at the heart of Patient Access.

Every day we can see that healthcare is transforming. This change is driven by the realization that the most important aspect of healthcare delivery — and what should be the priority behind every initiative — is the patient. Terms like patient engagement, patient satisfaction and patient experience are no longer fluffy add-ons but are at the core of healthcare.

This thinking must drive the healthcare contact center system as well. How a patient interacts with a hospital contact center can set the tone for the patient-provider relationship; it is where patients form their first impression of the care journey, and it is often where patient engagement and satisfaction begin to take shape.

Access center employees must

begin to see themselves not just as scheduling agents but as the first line of care delivered to complex human beings who are driven by a multitude of needs and desires.

More than Scheduling Agents

A useful way to understand patients' needs is through Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs. The theory was first developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation," published in Psychological Review, and has since become a popular conceptual tool for understanding the various stages of human needs. See Figure 1 on page 18.

The idea is that there are certain basic and fundamental needs that must be satisfied before humans can move up the scale to take care of the more sophisticated needs. Of course, Maslow was aware that this is an over-simplification of how human needs and motivations operate; humans are capable of needing things from several stages simultaneously. But by viewing the patient through Maslow's theory, healthcare contact center employees can begin to treat patients as human beings with needs that must be met, rather than as just another box to be ticked.

For example, imagine a patient with abdominal pain that is very uncomfortable but not severe enough to necessitate a trip to the emergency room. The patient calls the hospital to make an appointment with a physician. At this point, the patient must meet their physiological and safety needs, which are levels one and two on Maslow's Hierarchy. In other words, the patient's call to the hospital is in response to a threat to their physical well-being, and the patient

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is most likely scared, worried and vulnerable.

Access center employees are often the first responders for patients trying to satisfy their need for physical well-being and safety. The access center employee can satisfy these essential level one and two needs through reassurance and providing a sense of belonging. The patient can feel safe, reassured and experience a sense of belonging when the access center employee responds with kindness and respect, listening to the patient's needs and making them feel welcome. At a time when patients feel vulnerable and scared, a reassuring tone and a kind word from someone can be all that is needed to restore a sense of self-respect and confidence, boosting them from level one or two up to level four: esteem. The access employee has the opportunity to respond to this need by kindly and respectfully gathering relevant information and connecting the patient with the right department and the physician, helping the patient begin their care journey.

A Mindset Shift

Viewing the patient as a complex human being in this way may seem somewhat over the top for a healthcare contact center, but there is a real opportunity in the access center to change how the healthcare system views the patient

and vice versa. And it is only with this shift in mindset that a true transformation to patient-centric care can take place. Providers must start to view patients as human beings with varying needs and then respond to those needs as best they can.

How do we make the shift in mindset necessary to get access center employees to view patients in this way? How can we ensure that the human element is intrinsically part of the Patient Access experience? How do we ensure patients are engaged, cared for and treated with respect when making an appointment, seeking medical advice or looking for reassurance from their healthcare organization? A simple rule: Fully engaged employees lead to satisfied patients. Access center employees who are happy, motivated and take pride in their work have the capacity and awareness to treat patients as holistic human beings with complex and varied needs.

Employee engagement is a term that is thrown around a lot, in large part because it is estimated that 71 percent of all employees are not actively engaged in their work, which leads to annual revenue losses of more than $11 billion. In many industries, this loss of revenue is enough to get leadership interested in improving levels of engagement. But in healthcare,

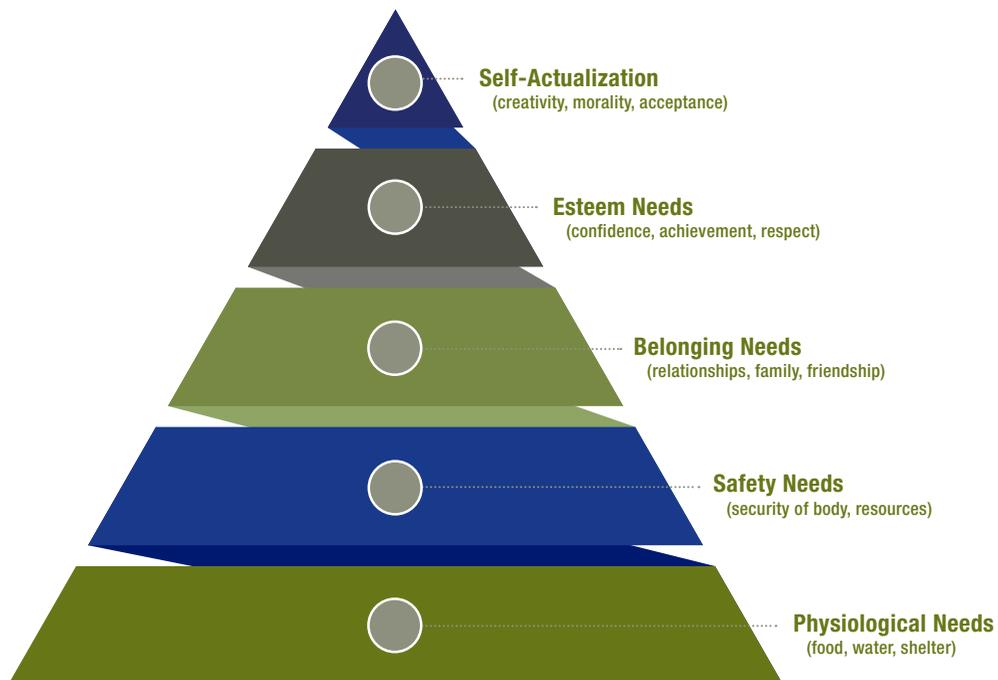# MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS BREAKS HUMAN NEEDS INTO FIVE LEVELS:

Self-Actualization
(creativity, morality, acceptance)

Esteem Needs
(confidence, achievement, respect)

Belonging Needs
(relationships, family, friendship)

Safety Needs
(security of body, resources)

Physiological Needs
(food, water, shelter)

Figure 1

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there are added issues of patient satisfaction, patient experience and overall patient outcomes to contend with. For healthcare, it's not just about employee retention and revenues, it's about patient care.

What Is an Engaged Employee?

Fully engaged employees are not just working for a wage but are working to create something they care about; they are working for a purpose greater than their own personal interest. They are emotionally and psychologically invested in the work they are doing. In Dan Pink's book, "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us," he points out that once people are paid fairly (an extrinsic motivator), then autonomy, mastery and purpose drive engagement and motivation in work.

- **Autonomy** occurs when access employees' work is self-directed. Micromanagement of every minor task can lead to feelings of powerlessness and resignation in employees; however, if they feel a sense of ownership, they are more likely to take pride in their work. This doesn't mean that employees should be left to their own devices, but that leadership and management are there to facilitate employees by giving meaningful feedback, a choice on

how to reach the end goal and positive encouragement.

- **Mastery** refers to a sense of progress as employees get better at a certain task. Again, access agents in a healthcare contact center can strive for mastery in many ways: by having the medical knowledge required to guide a patient to the right appointment based on the symptoms or concerns they have, or having the social and psychological awareness to comfort and reassure patients during a vulnerable time.

- **Purpose** is the key: If employees feel that they are working toward something greater than themselves, they can fully devote themselves to the work at hand. In a healthcare setting, this should be easy. Of all industries, healthcare is directly engaged in the most admirable and beneficial work: helping other human beings live well. Access agents are a key part of this process, and they should believe and feel that every day when they go to work.

How to Create an Engaged Environment

Leadership plays a huge role in creating an engaged environment. It is only with the right kind of leadership that high levels of engagement can be created in the healthcare contact center. Leaders need to focus not on the minutiae of details, but on creating a culture where the values outlined above are at the forefront.

According to Frederick Herzberg's article "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" in the Harvard Business Review, to create a deep and long-lasting sense of engagement, leaders can and should:

- Increase individuals' accountability for their work.

- Give people responsibility for a complete process or unit of work.

- Make information available directly to employees rather than sending it through line managers all the time.

- Enable people to take on new and more difficult tasks they haven't handled before.

- Assign individuals specialized tasks that allow them to become experts.

These points can be applied to the healthcare contact center by creating a culture of open communication and trust. The interesting point is that by focusing on these long-term cultural goals and encouraging the access employee to view the patient holistically, key performance indicators will start to improve. Punishing poor performance on a weekly basis is a waste of time unless effort is invested in creating a space where success can happen.

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