Finding (or Developing) Telehealth Champions

A White Paper

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Champions in Telehealth: A Discussion

The contents of this paper are based on a discussion among National Telehealth Resource Center (TRC) Coalition Members and a further discussion among NRTRC Members.

What is a Telehealth Champion?

One of the most-often heard statements in discussions revolving around starting or growing a Telehealth network is that the network must have a champion or champions. NRTRC has always included that statement in discussions for startup networks or for networks that aren't being used as fully as administrators would like. "You've got to find a champion," is a comment we've heard often. But why must we? What does 'being a champion' mean? What do champions do? Here are a few descriptions we've heard:

- Champions drive the Telehealth network process, growth and adoption
- Champions stimulate enthusiasm, offer guidance to providers who want to learn Telehealth and generally act as cheerleaders for the process
- Champions become role models, coaches and conscience-tweakers for the network
- Champions act as mentors for new network users
- Champions bridge the gap between management, IT and clinical associates, helping all 'sides' understand the needs of the others

That's all true, but one thing we don't hear very often in the discussion of the need for a champion is how we identify or develop them.

A lucky network development team will notice a provider champing at the bit to start distal delivery of services and enlist her or him for the development team. This provider becomes a reservoir of energy, supplying the drive for network development: the provider becomes a champion.

Occasionally a provider will see the value of Telehealth and pester his or her administrators until they start making moves toward starting a Telehealth network, perhaps just to quiet the provider down a little. The provider has become a champion.

Champions will learn everything they can about Telehealth and share that information with whomever will listen. It's often the case that champions can show hospital administrators that Telehealth can increase revenues and the public's esteem for a hospital. Rather like the old

saying about advertising that marketers recite, Telehealth champions suggest that 'Telehealth doesn't cost…it pays.'

Still, finding a champion is a challenge, even in this day and age when Telehealth is widely used and understood to be a significant asset to a care system,

Finding or Developing Champions: Some Strategies

A recent exchange of e-mails among Telehealth Resource Center directors and NRTRC members started with the following question:

"I have been asked what the secret to get clinical champions for telemedicine is. Anyone interested in revealing your or someone else's secret?"

Responses to the query included:

- I don't know about others, but for me it has been: awareness, education, support, perseverance....and luck! If you aren't one of the fortunate programs who had a physician jumping up and down about telemedicine and would go through anything to make sure it worked, then it takes time and patience.

   Build up the awareness of what Telehealth is...educate them on how it can help them and specifically their patients...help them get started and be there to help (notice I didn't say "hold their hands" but to be there when they need you) and encourage them in their utilization...understand that it may take a long time to build up their appreciation for what Telehealth means to their practice and the patients they serve. ([At a previous employer], our biggest champion (ID doctor) took about three years to really get moving and to buy-in...but then he really took off and was our biggest supporter and partner)...and, honestly, a good amount of luck.

   In actuality...maybe an organization will never have a "physician" champion, maybe the clinical champion is the nurse who speaks the physician language and can bring them on-board, maybe the champion is elsewhere in the organization (administration?)...or maybe it is "you"!!
- I've always felt that clinical champions were like 4-leaf clovers. If you ever find one, you can thank your Lucky Stars!

   Having found them infrequently, I cultivate CFOs into champions by telling them the use of telemedicine must be part of the Business Plan. If not, it won't be sustainable because it won't be supported adequately by administrators.

   That doesn't necessarily mean that the telemedicine activity itself must be profitable. It only means that the telemedicine activity must have a distinct role in the organization, even if that role is only strategic (image enhancement, community commitment, regional leadership, staff/physician support, etc.)

- In reply to the above observation: Yes...good point!! If you don't have a CFO to work on...the highest administrator (or the next to the top) would be a good "target" for that awareness, education, etc. effort. (For the long-haul!)
- I want to add something that I did which worked very well for retaining providers.

  Recognize them for their efforts. I gave a "Best telemedicine doctor" plaque to a dermatologist who provided teledermatology store-and-forward to 4 critical access hospitals for 2 1/2 years for free.

  I know this sounds funny...Bake something special for them: Every Christmas I baked baklava for each one of the providers and gave it to them as "a thank you for their service"...every single one of them loved it and was looking forward to it. In fact, some of the dermatologists, who I still have a relationship with …ask when I am going to bake them baklava.
- I've also found that the clinician that is frustrated with business as usual (tired of traveling, can't give the quality of care to patients that is needed, etc.), once turned on to Telehealth, can become the greatest champion. I have advised people that if they don't have a champion, see if they can identify the clinician who is ready for something to change and then handhold them through a successful Telehealth solution. This has worked on a number of occasions and these people end up being the most vocal champions.

How Do We Develop A Champion if We don't Have One?

- I would say that it's about seeing the need, the potential to make a difference, and then deciding that you are willing to become that person who makes the difference. It sounds cliché but I think the strong desire to help people is at the heart of what we do—we all have chosen to spend time on telemedicine because we want to help people—it's an extension of why we became doctors and nurses.
- I agree this is an interesting question, because Telemedicine requires so much more than just a clinical champion.

  My experience has been that the clinical champion believes in the value of telemedicine for health care delivery. Having said that, the secret is to convince clinical staff that this is a win/win situation for both the patient and provider. Administration is ultimately responsible for thoughtful development and implementation of telemedicine services. If done properly, the clinical staff is engaged in an efficient and effective healthcare delivery model that benefits patients, providers and the organization as a whole. I think the better question is how can we develop corporate champions that inspire and motivate clinical adoption of telemedicine?

- Be sure to have physicians who use Telehealth talk to those who don't in order to share the value of providing service with Telehealth connections. Peer-to-peer discussions carry a lot of credibility and may well convince the non-users that trying Telehealth is worth the effort
- Have the Telehealth department sponsor a "physician's play day," in which non-users (and infrequent users) can use Telehealth equipment and peripherals, test them to see whether they would meet their needs and have informal video encounters with other providers. Encouraging non-users to gain familiarity with the products and envision how Telehealth can enhance their practices may convert them to champions. (She adds: "Don't call them play days when you talk to the docs.")
- We hold mock codes using a patient simulator. The procedure helps our providers accustom themselves to the process of Telehealth and shows physicians and nurses on the distal end of the connection the value of Telehealth to their location. It's a win-win and we often find champions at the remote site.

Final Thoughts

There you have it. There are a few common themes in the answers above. These are listed below:

- Champions can drive Telehealth adoption and success
- Champions should be sought out from not only provider ranks, but administrative ranks as well. As suggested, if the C-Suite doesn't see the value of Telehealth, they may never approve its adoption
- Some champions are born, others are developed
- Provide opportunities for communication between providers
- Several different concepts can motivate champions:
    - The knowledge that Telehealth will improve patient care
    - The knowledge that through Telehealth, providers can reach patients they may never have been able to help
    - The knowledge that provider efficiency can improve
    - The knowledge that Telehealth can be a major part of a hospital's business plan
    - More patients can be helped through Telemedicine
    - Telehealth can benefit patients, providers and the organization as a whole
- Sometimes it takes luck to find a champion
- Never fail to recognize a champion for his/her leadership
- And don't forget: Fresh-baked baklava always helps

And never hesitate to contact your regional Telehealth Resource Center for answers and assistance. You can find your TRC at http://telehealthresourcecenters.org.