



Hill Physicians — Finding Balance at the Top

By Dan Robinson, Vice President, Corporate Services; Chief Administrative Officer, PriMed Management Consulting Services/Hill Physicians Medical Group

Hill Physicians Medical Group has enjoyed a position atop the IPA market for nearly two decades. Serving 340,000 HMO patients through a

network of nearly 2,700 physicians, Hill Physicians is the largest medical group outside of Kaiser Permanente in Northern California. The casual work

environment and diverse workforce of Hill Physicians' management company, PriMed Management Consulting Services, reflect the values and composition of the communities served by the Hill doctors. Yet, though the corporate culture is often compared to Silicon Valley start-ups that dot the Bay Area landscape around its San Ramon headquarters, the environment remains decidedly different from the frenzy of the high-tech counterparts. That difference is a focus on "balance."

Steve McDermott, CEO, says, "Like many entrepreneurs and owners of start-ups, for years I worked the 60- to 80-hour weeks. It wasn't healthy, but it was the accepted time-proven path to success. Unfortunately, while nurturing a business, I neglected focusing on what was really important, like relationships and my own health. I lost both before I took the time to slow down and ask myself, 'Isn't there a better way?'"

McDermott concluded working harder and longer didn't equate to better results, particularly over the long run. Burnout and fatigue interfered with key ingredients to success at work — innovation, creativity and service to the physicians and patients. Plus, time away from family and home sabotaged personal relationships and health. "Employees often carried their work home with them, and not surprisingly, also carried their problems at home back to work with them," McDermott observes. "There wasn't time to manage both, so neither



work nor personal lives were handled well. Everyone suffered.”

Thus began a culture shift that has been a full seven years in the making, targeting both physician practices and the employees of the Hill Physicians management organization.

In 2002, Hill Physicians first reached out to physicians advocating work-life balance. McDermott notes, “We wanted

to give our doctors tools to help ease the stress that comes with running a practice. Studies show that physicians have mortality rates

higher than any other profession in the same socioeconomic range. Studies also report that 31% of physicians would not choose to be a physician again.” Hill sponsored weekend retreats, initially for physicians and their spouse or partner, then later expanded the program to include physician practice staff. Attendees learn how to create balance in their lives despite their hectic schedules. Since inception, the retreats have regularly filled with attendees.

Hill Physicians has seen an unexpected but pleasing outcome attributable at least in part to this outreach to physicians. “As we closed out the 1990s, our annual physician survey results were not impressive,” recalls McDermott. “Only 66% of our responding doctors indicated overall satisfaction with their affiliation with Hill Physicians. After 2002, that number jumped to 80% expressing satisfaction with Hill. Last year, we reached 92% satisfaction. The physicians’ practice staff satisfaction with Hill Physicians hit 95%. Many programs and services we

offer contribute to those levels of satisfaction, but we also know from direct feedback that providing services above and beyond the norm, like our Finding Balance workshops, directly help foster satisfaction.”

PriMed, the management arm of Hill Physicians, reports similar results. Named in 2005 as one of the “Top 100 places to work in the Bay Area,” the

Burnout and fatigue interfered with key ingredients to success at work — innovation, creativity and service to the physicians and patients. Plus, time away from family and home sabotaged personal relationships and health.

company continues to test and adopt innovative programs that contribute to organizational stability and retention of valuable talent in the hyper-competitive health care industry. In 2000, PriMed suffered from 35% annual attrition rates and workers’ compensation claims that led to a 350% experience mod, sending its workers’ compensation costs skyrocketing. “We weren’t in a position to best serve our physicians if we couldn’t keep

our employees on board, healthy and content,” notes McDermott.

Since 2000, the company has adopted flexible and alternative work schedules, helping employees beat the challenges of heavy commute hours. A company-wide wellness program focuses on helping employees improve key clinical measures but also offers such stress-management techniques as yoga and massage. Last year,

over two-thirds of employees participated in the program. “Finding Balance Days,” where an employee can take a discretionary day

off to spend with his or her family, friends or simply to find some personal “R&R time,” has been eagerly embraced. And “Summer Hours,” offering a reduced workweek between Memorial Day and Labor Day to allow employees to get a two-hour jump on the weekends every Friday, is generally viewed as employees’ favorite benefit in the annual employee satisfaction survey.

The results to PriMed, and thus to Hill Physicians in terms of organizational stability, are impressive. In 2007, the organization’s annualized attrition rate is below 10%, and workers compensation costs are 25% of what they were five years ago. Says Steve, “We view supporting work-life balance as an informed investment in our business. It helps us build commitment from our physicians and from our employees. And it’s a win-win for everyone.”

Dan Robinson is the Chief Administrative Officer for PriMed, the management services organization for Hill Physicians Medical Group. Dan may be reached at dan.robinson@hpmg.com. ■

Steve McDermott

