

The Progression of Culture Within a Residency Program

by MATT WILSON MAY 26, 2013

What does every single residency program ever created have in common? The answer is they all started out as an idea; one person's fantasy as to how their vision can make a difference to the world. From the minute a residency program is born, a program culture is installed within it. For those programs that cannot afford to hire faculty at the inception point, the culture is enshrined within the values and beliefs of the founding members and so culture will play a smaller role limited to these individuals at this stage.

But every program, no matter how big, needs a starting point and this is also applicable to multinational corporations, such as Virgin, Microsoft and Facebook, who all began in a similar way. Sir Richard Branson, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg would all have gone through the same motions at the beginning, an idea as to how their residency program can change the world, but an initial lack of manpower to achieve the heights they were dreaming of. Today they are the figureheads of their respective and very successful residency programs, employing thousands of people and the culture instilled at the beginning of their residency program journey plays a fundamental role in the lifeblood and day to day running of their programs.

Taking on Faculty:

Program culture will start taking a much more prominent role within a residency program as it starts to grow, and faculty are hired to help build the residency program "fantasy." The founding values and beliefs will start rubbing off on the faculty as they work closely on a day-to-day level within the residency program, and they start learning the knowledge and the program way of doing things.

With my program, when we first recruited faculty and we started to expand beyond the team consisting of just myself and my residency program partner Lee McAteer, we had to personally teach and train them to do things the way we knew best. I was essentially creating 'duplicates' of myself by sharing my knowledge with the staff of how I did things because, as the old saying goes 'knowledge is power'. If I could clone myself, then the issue of staffing would be diminished, but we live in a world of finite resources and finite knowledge, so it's very important that residency program owners train their staff so that their knowledge and way of doing things within a residency program is at a very advanced level.

Throughout this training, the owner's way of doing things and the residency program culture will rub off onto the faculty. Further down the line, when it comes to these faculty having to eventually train further new faculty, the residency program knowledge and culture that they picked up from the owner, will also rub from them to the next generation

employee; so, the residency program culture and way of doing things would have reached the second employee, potentially without them ever having met the initial founders.

Competition:

As a residency program continues to grow, eventually it will appear on the radar of its competitors. When this happens, a battle of culture will emerge as each program tries to pitch to its applicants why their educational approach is superior; and culture plays an important role within the heart and foundations of this pitch.

From my own personal experience with my program, the established programs when pitching seem to have a false sense of “divine right” to these customers. Phrases like “we have been around longer”, “we know the market better”, “we are bigger and better than the competition” are thrown about all too easily by the established programs who seem to have an almost patronizing sense of security and antipathy at the thought that their superiority should be threatened by a new program that thinks they can do it better than they can.

A classic example to illustrate this is that of the disdain attitude shown by the MGH to UNC when they launched into the Med Peds world. However, what the established programs under appreciate is that the market is always changing and always evolving, and organizations must be on their toes and constantly innovating and staying in touch with the latest developments and crazes to maintain their existence. Whereas an existing program has its old and traditional ‘tried and tested’ methods of success, usually a new program with new ideas and a fresh perspective is much better served to make inroads to taking away customers from established competitors and to grow the market by advertising themselves as a young and hip program that is more in touch with the times, which ultimately will deliver a better customer experience.

What should program culture be?

The truth is that there is no right answer as to what program culture should be because every culture is different for every program which stems down to what the underlying motivation was for the creation of the residency program on day one; whether it was to change the world, to do things better than the competition, or to exploit a potential gap in the market. This makes finding the right people at the beginning who share the same motivation of vital importance to a residency program, as the founding individual(s) pass on their knowledge and way of doing things to these faculty in the form of delegation, who can continue the program mission. There is no denying that delegation is hard for residency program owners, who have almost perfect knowledge of their product (and the issue of delegation is a whole different topic in itself); but if you can find the right people and invest your time in training and enlightening them, it will make delegation much easier.

Employee action plan

Residency program leadership should therefore come up with a faculty action plan to maximize their growth within a residency program. If you have found the right candidate to help grow your residency program and they are fully trained, the next stage is to encourage resident and faculty scholarship. By setting up a program, you will display scholarly characteristics in abundance, e.g., being an independent free thinker, creativity, passion, leadership, vision, a driving personality, initiative as well as a 'can do' attitude and you should encourage your faculty to display these skills as well. For faculty and residents to maximize their growth, this involves the residency program owner taking on board their ideas and coming up with a strategy to implement this and turn their ideas into reality. Therefore, it is very important that there is a strategy in place to encourage and reward faculty and resident ideas and initiative, which in the long run will help drive the residency program forward. In addition, goals should be set together with the faculty and residents so that both parties are on the same page as to what needs to be achieved for the program to progress and move forward.

Summary:

Having the right people in place, who have a very in-depth knowledge of the program is essential for program culture to thrive in accordance with the founder's vision. Behind every brand, no matter how big or small, it comes down to the staff that are carrying out the residency program mission and making things happen and a program is only as good as the staff it employs. Therefore, a residency program should invest in its faculty, because if a residency program can build a great team, then they will build a great residency program, and this makes faculty as valuable to a residency program as its customers. At the beginning, when my program was being run out of a back room, if I got hit by a bus and died, my program would have died with me. Now, because we have fully trained staff that have knowledge about the program inside out, I know full well that my program could carry on without me because we have invested in the right staff who believe in the vision and core values of the program.

People often refer to a residency program team as a family and I can certainly vouch for this; as a team at my program, we are on a shared journey together, we learn together (and we are always learning new things everyday), we celebrate success together and we share any unfortunate tough residency program lessons together. Residency program culture is one of the most important things to a residency program because it is who you are, and it is ultimately why customers will choose you and therefore it is imperative that the right conditions are fostered to allow the program culture to flourish, and this will in turn make a residency program and its faculty grow collectively together.