Harvard Hospitals
Leading the Way to Better Care

Current U.S. health care reform has renewed focus for doctors on improving both quality and efficiency in care delivery, providing an impetus to think like managers in highly complex organizations and to use skills not typically taught in medical schools. Doctors working in academic medical centers face an even bigger challenge, as these organizations are equal parts hospitals, medical training institutions, and research facilities. “These are very busy doctors trying to make sure that people don’t die. So it’s not that surprising that their medical school training has zero minutes even on living in an organization, forget about helping to run an organization. And yet when some doctors get to a certain career stage, that’s now part of their job,” says Robert Gibbons, the Sloan Distinguished Professor of Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. How can these over-extended professionals develop the skills they need outside of their core practice?

Faculty at MIT Sloan School of Management have long-standing research collaborations with Boston-area academic medical centers – Massachusetts General Hospital, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and Boston Children’s Hospital among others – focused on improving efficiency and the quality of care in many areas of hospital operations. These relationships helped motivate the department heads of Anesthesiology at several Harvard-affiliated academic hospitals to partner with MIT Sloan in a custom executive education program designed to improve the quality and efficiency of health care. “It is the perfect time for developing physician leaders to lead health care reform,” says Dr. Brett A. Simon, Professor of Anaesthesia, Harvard Medical School, and Chairman, Department of Anesthesia, Critical Care and Pain Medicine at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

Working closely with the leadership of Anesthesiology departments, MIT Sloan faculty and Executive Education staff created a cross-institutional program to enable anesthesiologists to solve some of their most persistent problems, using management frameworks developed at MIT, and in so doing to become leaders of change in their organizations. Characteristic of MIT Sloan custom executive education programs, the program design incorporated teaching of research-based management frameworks, which were then applied to real-life situations in the hospital setting. Also distinctive was the high degree of collaboration on program design and development among representatives of the participating hospitals, MIT Sloan faculty, and Executive Education professional staff.

MIT Sloan Executive Education Custom Programs

SUCCESS STORY

CHALLENGE
In response to the pending U.S. health care reform, the Anesthesiology Department heads at several Boston-area academic medical centers aim to empower medical professionals with leadership skills needed to improve patient care in a changing industry.

STRATEGY
Design a multi-discipline, integrated custom program to teach management and leadership frameworks to the emerging leaders in anesthesiology.

EXPERIENCE
Create a collaborative education environment where participants can learn from MIT Sloan faculty and each other how to identify, analyze, and address some of the prevailing challenges in the practice through a combination of teaching sessions, group discussions, and mentored projects.

RESULT
After an intensive session at MIT Sloan and just seven weeks to implement projects in their hospitals, participants have become not only active change agents, but also role models for others in their institutions, sharing knowledge and leading by example.
What was not typical was the compressed pace required to accommodate the work schedules of practicing anesthesiologists. The program began on a Friday evening, and ran through an intensive weekend of two 12-hour days of immersive learning. Participants learned from a diverse team of MIT Sloan faculty that included experts in economics, ethnography, organizational behavior, operations management, and continuous improvement. The teaching team brought a wide perspective on a variety of subjects, tightly integrated and selected for their relevance to the participants. The program included a “Deep Dive,” a critical method for integrating the program’s different management frameworks by applying them directly to a real challenge – in this case, staffing in academic anesthesiology departments. Action-learning projects were designed to address strategic areas of improvement – staffing patterns, patient transitions from operating room to ICU, on-time starts for surgical cases, supply management and waste elimination, and communication among perioperative team members – by applying organization-level analysis to problems, and following a continuous improvement methodology to drive operational changes.

Just seven weeks later, participants returned to MIT to report on the projects to Anesthesiology department heads, MIT Sloan faculty mentors, and each other. “You could see even after two days, and especially after they came back, that their whole language changed. I believe that they thought differently about their environment,” observes Retsef Levi, Associate Professor of Operations Management, who is the program faculty co-director along with Robert Gibbons. “The other impact that this had is that by bringing people from different places they realized how common their problems are. And they were able to learn from each other.”

The action-learning projects had an impact on hospital operations. For instance, the group from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center presented their project at the annual symposium of the Silverman Institute for Health Care Quality and Safety, a conference focused on current topics in the field of quality and patient safety. One of the team projects done at Massachusetts General Hospital, called “An Electronic Checklist Improves Patient Information Transfer and Retention at Intraoperative Handoff of Care,” was chosen as a “Best Abstract” presented at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Society of Anesthesiologists. “MIT Sloan program participants became role models for others, leading continuing development in their organizations,” says Dr. Muret-Wagstaff.

In Levi’s opinion it is the practical nature of the program that attracts this group to MIT Sloan. “Most department heads go to high-level programs where they talk about finance and general management, but in a very theoretical way. I think that everyone who participated or was observing or was involved in any way realized that this was a very different value proposition. It’s hands-on, it’s custom, it has a very strong industry connection and it is problem-focused.”