

COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER: DISC CASE STUDY FOR TEAM DEVELOPMENT

LOWELL COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

Introduction

For more than 50 years, Lowell Community Health Center (Lowell) has assured access to high quality, affordable health care for children and adults of all ages – regardless of their ability to pay. Lowell has served the diverse communities of greater Lowell since 1970 and has grown to include many specialty services in addition to comprehensive primary health care, dental services, and eye care. A key focus for Lowell’s future is health system transformation. To meet this critical moment in our history, they needed to first focus internally and reorient the ways in which staff interact with one another. This included improving the types of interactions and the frequency by which they communicate across departments to foster their truth of inclusivity and health equity.

Note: This Case Study does not promote one type of DiSC Assessment over another but serves as a deeper dive into how the Lowell leveraged their DiSC Assessment to begin transforming their health center’s culture.

DiSC: A Tool to Build Culture Change

DiSC is an assessment tool used to help improve teamwork, communication, and productivity. The results are mapped in tandem with their colleagues’ workplace style. Completing a DiSC Assessment is a way to uncover communication, processing, and decision-making styles. There are many vendors who offer different styles of DiSC Assessments, but the fundamental results remain constant.

These four basic tenets are key to leveraging DiSC for your health center:

1. Obtain buy-in at the C-Suite level of your health center first, and then socialize the concepts with influential staff to gain momentum and advance culture change so that staff have a safe space to learn how to engage, collaborate, and align.
2. Interview the facilitator who conducts your DiSC Assessment and then manage that relationship for cultural goodness-of-fit longer term.



AT-A-GLANCE

Number of Patients Seen
Annually - Unique Patients
31K, Lives Touched 50K

Staff: 400

Staff participated in DISC: 125

Locations: 1 Main Site, 2
School-Based Health Centers

Geography: Large Suburb

Service Area: Greater
Lowell/Middlesex County

Payor Mix: Medicaid,
Medicare, MA Health Safety
Net Private Carriers, Self-Pay

3. Once you have your DiSC Assessment results of the staff, you'll need a champion to continue the applied learnings in the workplace.
4. Build DiSC into your current and onboarding structure to ensure successful implementation.

DiSC Readiness

Lowell faced many challenges, including changes in payment and delivery reform policies, patient population changes, the COVID-19 pandemic, staff turnover—to name a few. To turn the tide to better serve their patients, Lowell needed to take a beat and do some introspection after stabilizing their financial outlook and reviewing their return-on-investments in the communities they served. As a result, their Chief Strategy and Financial Officer championed DiSC as an organizing tool to engage staff at all levels to effect internal change to meet this moment. Implementing DiSC allowed the staff to proactively embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in salient ways. Lowell needed a new internal operating code of conduct at all staffing levels. Societally, we are living in a time of great pain and the staff of Lowell were not exempt to hardships. It was time for sweeping culture change to stem the tide. The staff needed to feel seen and heard, empowered to ask more intentional questions, and challenge the status quo to do better by their patients, and become agents of change.

You are Ready to Implement DiSC When:

- ✓ You have a champion who will manage implementation of DiSC and can set a course over six months to a year to integrate DiSC activities into existing meeting structures.
- ✓ You have socialized the concept with C-Suite level and above in order to obtain buy-in.
- ✓ You have established a budget for the costs, which depend on staff size but vary from \$5K to \$25K.
- ✓ You have interviewed and decided on a trained facilitator who you will need to trust and coach about the needs of your staff.

The intersection between technology and equity with a focus on outcomes is the center of our transformative strategy.

Brenda Rodriguez, Chief Strategy and Financial Officer, Lowell Community Health Center

How to Use DiSC in the Workplace

DiSC is attractive because it is a technology-based platform used across all levels of staff that produces outcomes data quickly. It does not take a lot of time to implement and fosters inclusion regardless of position. Lowell was able to integrate usage of DiSC into their existing operating structure, so it did not become burdensome or a heavy lift for their staff to participate. It was also communicated to staff that DiSC is part of their staff's professional

development and that Lowell is committed to investing in their staff's future. The time it takes to invest in DiSC as a tool to open doors and get people talking about how they show up in the workplace to each other is time well spent if it means that people are asking better questions about their work, building new relationships, working across teams, and leveling up their skills.

The Cost of DiSC

The cost of DiSC was minimal when it came to investing in their staff and professional development. The opportunity costs of implementing it outweighed the need for not doing it. Outside of purchasing the assessment and hiring the trained facilitator, there was no extra work added to staff work plates at Lowell. There is an investment made during the decision-making process and to get buy-in as well as coach the facilitator about how to engage your staff, but the investment is worth the reward. Lowell's key emphasis was to integrate DiSC into their culture, so it was not a heavy lift.

"I shared DiSC with my entire team... this can help them anywhere. I want an army of people who are advocates that care about equity across the nation. When staff leave, I want them to take this sense of self to their next place. It just helps us and our community when we advocate for ourselves."

Brenda Rodriguez, Chief Strategy and Financial Officer, Lowell Community Health Center

Reactions from Lowell Staff

Early on, Lowell leadership did not have alignment when it came to making decisions. There was not a shared vision of how to execute. They were having the same conversations in a loop and not getting to solutions-based programming. DiSC was introduced by Lowell's CFO and Chief Strategy Officer as a way for their team to better understand each other's perspectives and workplace communications tendencies. Once DiSC was implemented at the leadership level, they included all the staff by cohort over the course of three to six-months. There was some trepidation at first by some of the staff because there is a vulnerability that comes from this type of self-assessment, but once people started to see the results of their DiSC assessments, it gave the staff a new way of relating to each other.

"Instead of meetings where everyone goes around and gives updates and leave, we now come together collaboratively to review plans and key metrics...It was foundational to our workflow changes."

Brenda Rodriguez, Chief Strategy and Financial Officer, Lowell Community Health Center

Meaningful Results from Leveraging DiSC

While DiSC alone will not change culture, when accompanied by championing, coaching, increased self-awareness, mutual understanding, active listening, modeling, and open lines of communications that go along with using DiSC, do produce change. By leveraging DiSC, Lowell was able to get out from under its everyday way of doing business in siloes, find alignment in decision-making, increase understanding of each other through asking

better questions, show up in new ways for each other, uncover new skills and ideas, and establish new ways of communicating in meetings.

After completing the DiSC assessment, a survey was sent to staff to collect feedback on the process. Results were collected from staff who participated, and more than half of the staff noted that participating in DiSC to be helpful for professional development and would recommend DiSC to others.

The Future of DiSC at Lowell

After a year of investing in staff professional development through DiSC, Lowell found increases in the...

- Number of promotions.
- Number of presentations provided by staff at all levels.
- Number of professional growth plans.
- Number of interdepartmental collaborations.
- Number of patient complements about their staff.

“We can’t afford to not make the right investments in our staff because we ask a lot of them. We need to counteract the deficit mindset. The only way to transform the way we deliver health care is to start with shifting hearts and minds.”

Brenda Rodriguez, Chief Strategy and Financial Officer, Lowell Community Health Center

Conclusion

While DiSC is not a one-stop-shop solution, it is a powerful, affordable tool that can open doors for leadership and staff who desire new ways of problem-solving, understanding each other, and decision-making. Community Health Centers who are at a tipping point where there is both the will and desire to change daily interactions would be well-served by DiSC after having met the criteria laid out in this case study to take the initial steps. To advance through any impasses, start by asking the question of what cultural norms continue if the investment is not made. For more information about how to approach using DiSC in your health center, please contact the National Association for Community Health Centers at trainings@nachc.org.

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