

Emotional Process in the Workplace Can Impact Job Performance

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In the new world of work, many tasks and functions are accomplished through temporary or permanent outsourcing arrangements/relationships. All parties to these relationships can benefit by being aware of emotional process in organizations. "Being aware is more important than being smart," states Phil Jackson, former coach of the Chicago Bulls and author of Sacred Hoops. His statement is a nice starting point to discuss three-way relationships (client manager/staffing firm manager/staffing firm employees) common in the new work environment and how they are affected by emotional process in the workplace.

An Emotional System

My discussion of emotional process is based on "Bowen Family Systems Theory," a theory of human behavior that applies to the functioning of families as well as other social groups. Dr. Murray Bowen noted that when a group of people come together to achieve a common goal, in time they begin to function as a unit, or as an "emotional system." The emotional system operates like a mobile. If you pull on one piece of the mobile, what happens to the other pieces? They all shift. In this context, the word "emotional" refers to the automatic or instinctual responses that individuals have to one another. When we feel as though we are operating on "automatic pilot," we are caught up in the system's "emotional process."

Developing an awareness of emotional process and the patterns of behavior in your workplace is important because the patterns are observable and predictable. We can modify our behavior when we are more acutely aware of how we impact one another. When individuals within the system, as well as those who are relating to the system, are explicit about their responsibilities and expectations, their behavior is more likely to be purposeful and less automatic or reactive. Relationship systems thrive on such clarity.

Facts vs. Feelings

When individuals base their responses on known or agreed upon facts, the system functions more effectively. When responsibilities and expectations are vague, conflicting or simply unknown, the system becomes "anxious," the parties are more reactive and people speak in terms of how they "feel" rather than how they "think." Thus, clear and open communication among the three parties in a staffing relationship is essential.

For example, a coding backlog often requires a health information management (HIM) director to contract with an HIM staffing company to send in temporary coders. The company needs a full understanding of the scope of the assignment, including the volume and type of cases to be coded, the work environment, the tools available or required, the working hours and the productivity and data quality standards of the client. The staffing company's account manager must clearly define the assignment to the coders who will be going to the client facility. The client must understand the needs of the temporary coders for orientation, supervision and feedback. Contracts and work assignment forms should be written clearly to help assure that all of the information is gathered and properly communicated.

Additionally, human interaction must supplement written documents. In today's busy world, with people

feeling pressured for time and with ready access to e-mail, fax machines and voice mail, the parties in the three-way relationship may fail to have sufficient dialogue. Verbally reviewing documents together is essential to confirm that the necessary level of understanding is present about the engagement.

Anxiety Impacts Performance

The failure to take time to communicate effectively is one symptom of an anxious work system. Anxiety in organizations is contagious. It spreads from person to person, department to department. An anxious HIM department may be in a highly reactive mode because it has been “infected” by the anxiety of others in the institution. The sources of anxiety in organizations vary. Anxious behavior may be the result of major organizational trauma, such as a merger, acquisition or downsizing. It may be due to a temporary stress, such as an upcoming Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations or Office of Inspector General survey. Whatever the source of the anxiety, the effectiveness of individuals is influenced by how well they can manage their own reactivity in a highly anxious work system. Some symptoms of anxiety include:

- subnormal performance;
- tardiness;
- absenteeism;
- conflicts with others;
- not enough time to communicate;
- excessive gossiping;
- blaming; and
- cliques.

Most often, if leaders can recognize the effect of anxiety and manage their own anxiety, the staff can calm down, because being calm is also contagious. This, of course, is easy to say, but not so easy to practice.

Calm Presence Is Important

In my 27 years as a consultant, the most important contribution I can make when working with an organization is to have a calm presence. It has been my experience that when a system is less anxious, performance rises, solutions appear and problems suddenly seem more manageable. In a three-way relationship, all parties can influence organizational functioning by being calm and increasing their own awareness of emotional process in the workplace. The greatest challenge that we face today is creating time to be thoughtful, managing our own anxiety and promoting calm behavior. Take time out of your day to assess your own calm presence.

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