Where Are You in Your Triangles?

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The availability of outsourcing, consulting and temporary staffing service companies today offers health care institutions a wide range of solutions to short- and long-term staffing challenges. Third-party employers offer health information management (HIM) professionals a greater variety of employment opportunities. The resulting triadic relationships between employee, staffing company employer and client institution, which has been the focus of this column, requires all parties to have an awareness of how emotional process impacts the success of the staffing engagement. In this month's column I shall explore the complexities of interlocking triangles and the value of knowing one's own position in the triangles.

Coding Function Relationships

The coding function is an excellent example of a mission-critical function that affects and is affected by a multitude of interested parties:

- The chief financial officer (CFO) has an interest because coding of diagnoses and procedures drives the reimbursement process.
- The corporate compliance officer (CCO) is concerned about surveillance of the hospital's coding by the Office of Inspector General (OIG).
- The utilization review manager worries about rejections or sanctions by professional review organizations' (PRO) reviewers.
- The medical staff is held responsible for the accuracy of clinical data submitted for reimbursement, but most physicians are rarely experts in the complex coding systems in use today.
- The director of the HIM department is responsible for managing a function that requires highly skilled staff, who are scarce, and whose performance is affected significantly by the quality of documentation by clinicians.

All of these parties relate to the coders individually or collectively, creating a web of interlocking triangles (see illustration) To say anxious behavior is often observed in or around the coding function is an understatement.

Recognizing Anxiety

We can recognize anxiety in the system by observing relationship behaviors. Human beings manage anxiety naturally through a variety of adaptive behaviors, including conflict, distance, reciprocal functioning and projection. We all use such behaviors in response to the level of reactivity we are experiencing. Adaptive behaviors enable a system to prevent anxiety from compromising its ability to accomplish its objectives. A few examples of adaptive behaviors that serve to manage anxiety are bickering over "petty matters," going for a walk to "cool off," or over-functioning for a subordinate for fear that the work won't get done correctly or on time. These behaviors should not be characterized as good or bad. They are just part of being human.

However, when anxiety becomes too great for a system to manage, the adaptive behaviors escalate and become maladaptive. For example, conflicts are maladaptive when employees who bicker from time to time

begin to have shouting matches. A more extreme example of maladaptive behavior is conflict that escalates to violence. An example of maladaptive distancing is when the person who takes lots of walks can no longer "take it" and quits her job. When the over-functioning supervisor feels exhausted, used and over-burdened (i.e., "burned out") the adaptive behavior has become maladaptive.

Managing Anxiety in The Coding Function

With so many connections to other parts of the work system, failure to manage anxiety in the coding function presents a danger of spreading anxiety throughout the organization. Everyone involved with coding can play a role in managing the anxiety. To reduce anxiety and improve functioning in your organization, there are three steps: first, assess the level of anxiety, second, understand your own role, and third identify where you might be able to change your own behavior.

1. Assessment: One way to assess anxiety in a system is simply to draw the various relationship triangles and pinpoint where the behaviors are most reactive. Try this exercise:

Draw a key triangle such as the coding supervisor, the HIM director and the CFO in your organization or in a client's organization. Label each side of the triangle as in the sample Triangle 1 in illustration 2. Are the relationships on all sides of the triangle characterized by regular and open communication? Is there evidence of respect between each of the pairs? Or, are there obvious conflicts or cut-off?

Then try the exercise with all of the triangles involving coding. For example, draw the triangle of the coding supervisor, the hospital's coders, and the contract coders. Think about how to characterize the behavior in those relationships. Is the behavior collaborative, productive and relaxed, or do you observe behavior that is resentful, angry and tense. Draw the triangles on a large sheet of paper, creating a diagram depicting the interlocking nature of the triangles by connecting all of them as in illustration 1. Add the terms descriptive of each relationship triangle to pinpoint the anxious triangles.

2. Understand where you fit into each triangle: Can you think about ways in which you could change your behavior and imagine how that might change the relationship system?

For example, a coding supervisor is in an anxious triangle with the HIM director and the coding consultant who is doing compliance audits. The HIM director is angry with the supervisor because the consultant has found numerous coding errors. The supervisor is angry with the consultant for being "too picky." The consultant is frustrated with both of them for attacking her findings rather than discussing ways to implement her recommendations.

What is going on here? Clearly everyone "feels" threatened. The behavior is highly anxious because each person is focusing on what the other is doing "wrong."

3. Changing behavior: The anxiety won't subside until at least one individual in the triangle gets out of reactive mode, puts the focus on self, and thinks about how she might be contributing to the problem.

In the example above, if any of the three people in the triangle can focus on facts in a calm, neutral manner, the level of reactivity will be affected.

If the HIM director would say to the coding supervisor, " in what ways do I need to better support your area so that your staff can function better," do you think she would get a different type of response from the supervisor?

If instead of challenging the consultant, the supervisor would ask the consultant for facts to support her findings as a way to educate her staff, do you think she might change the dialogue from one of confrontation to one of collaboration?

If instead of taking a defensive posture about her coding judgments, the consultant acknowledges the anxiety in the system and works with her clients to clarify the role they want her to take in the system could she avoid being caught up in the triangle?
The consultant could ask questions such as what do they think will best serve their organization: a consultant who is auditor, educator or facilitator?

The HIM department is under extreme pressure to complete coding tasks quickly and accurately. To accomplish this, the director or coding supervisor often hire third-party vendors to perform coding functions, assess quality or conduct training. Along with outstanding coding skills, coders, both internal and external, must be adept at managing multiple relationships with individuals or groups who are anxious about coding performance. This requires mature individuals who are calm enough to recognize anxious behavior and who can manage or minimize their own reactivity to it. Taking a neutral position, helping others focus on facts or urging everyone in the system to clarify roles and expectations are some excellent ways to manage your own anxiety and diminish system anxiety.

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