

Systems Vs. Individual Thinking

Leslie Ann Fox, MA, RHIA, Patty Thierry Sheridan, MBA, RHIA, CCS

Thank you to Advance Magazine for permission to use this article

The family systems theory, developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, is a well-known theory in the mental health field about human behavior and functioning. This perspective is unique because it focuses on the mutual interdependence of individuals in a social unit, rather than focusing on individual behavior. From this perspective, "problem behavior" in an employee, customer or supplier is considered a "symptom" of anxiety in the system.

Therein lies the critical distinction between views of the workplace based on systems thinking and individual thinking. Systems thinkers see individual behavior as a reflection of how the relationship system functions. When applying systems thinking, one steps back from anxious situations to take a broader view of events and consider one's own role in workplace problems. Systems thinkers recognize that each member of the work unit is part of the system, each effecting functioning in the system and being affected by it.

The use of outsourced health information management (HIM) services by hospitals and other health care organizations is an example of how an HIM workplace expands into multiple, complex relationship systems. Accomplishing our work requires a greater level of awareness and understanding.

Let's look at an example of a possible workplace situation involving a contract service company and contrast individual thinking from systems thinking.

An account manager at an HIM service company fulfills a request to send a temporary staff person to cover assembly and analysis for a two week vacation period. The temporary employee calls the account manager after a few days to report that the hospital's census has been low and she is not being given enough work to stay busy eight hours a day. The contract calls for downtime to be paid to guarantee an eight-hour day, but the HIM department director has told the contract employee that he does not feel he should pay for time the employee does not work. When the account manager calls the director to discuss the issue, the account manager gets the director's voice mail and leaves a detailed message regarding the problem and the need to discuss it.

The account manager receives a voice-mail message in return from the director reporting that the temporary employee is making too many mistakes in processing the records. He is unhappy with this person and does not want her sent to the facility again. The account manager is bewildered by this complaint because the employee has been with the firm for several years and consistently gets good evaluations from clients. In the meantime, the employee contacts the account manager and indicates that she does not want to return to this client in the future.

The account manager is in a tough position. She does not have all of the facts. She has not been able to observe the interaction of the employee and the HIM director, and she has been unable to have direct contact by telephone with the director. How she "thinks" about the situation will determine her behavior and the level

of her own anxiety as she interacts with the client and the consultant.

If the account manager is thinking from the perspective of “individual” behavior, she might be tempted to blame the director for not reading and abiding by the contract; suspect the director of inventing the complaint about poor performance; blame the employee for not reporting that the director was unhappy with her work; or wonder if the employee was not very tactful in her discussions with the director about the downtime issue.

If the account manager is thinking “systems,” her inclination is to first recognize that she is involved in an anxious triangle; maintain a calm and neutral position; reflect on the events, to determine what role she has played in elevating the anxiety in the triangle; seek more information about recent and current stresses affecting the client’s organization and specifically the HIM department; consider what organization stresses may be affecting the contracting company’s employee and account manager; and continue to let the director know that she is available to work with him to resolve the issue.

Which kind of thinking do you think will lead to a more successful outcome for everyone? Systems thinking increases awareness and opens up more pathways for action.

Leslie Ann Fox is president of Care Communications Inc., Chicago. She invites readers to send their thoughts and opinions on this column via e-mail to lfox@care-communications.com.