

Over-Functioning Can Be a Symptom Of Anxiety in the HIM Workplace

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Phil Jackson, the former head coach of the six-time NBA championship Chicago Bulls basketball team, described in his autobiography, *Sacred Hoops*, that one of his biggest challenges when first taking over the team was convincing super-star Michael Jordan to score fewer points in each game. What Phil Jackson understood so well was that in a relationship system, when someone over-functions, others in the system under-function. A winning team needs every member functioning at a high level.

Learning to observe and be more aware of anxiety-driven behavior provides a different perspective on performance in the workplace. In last month's column, I discussed a vision of high-level functioning in the workplace that is collaborative, creative, flexible and adaptable.

When organizations function at a high level of differentiation they have a preponderance of individuals who take responsibility for themselves, contribute in a calm and thoughtful way to resolving problems in the workplace, and communicate respectfully and with clarity. Organizations toward the lower end of the functional continuum exhibit more anxiety or reactive behaviors such as conflict, cutoff, projection and reciprocal functioning. Reciprocal functioning in a relationship occurs reactively, i.e., the more one person over-functions, the more the other under-functions, and vice versa. Looking for signs of over-functioning is important because it is often not viewed as behavior that hinders the system's effectiveness.

Over-functioners have good intentions. They usually are dedicated to the organization and/or co-workers. A health information management (HIM) consultant for a long-term care facility observed one example of over-functioning and how it compromises system effectiveness. As in many long-term care facilities, an HIM clerk received regular consultation from an HIM professional. The HIM clerk told the consultant she was "burned out." The consultant noted in her reports to the administrator the clerk's complaints about not having enough time to do her work, frequent absences due to illness, serious backlogs in record processing, failure to carry out all of the required record reviews and careless errors in indexes, reports and filing activities. The consultant probed to find the reasons for these problems and eventually learned that the clerk was performing numerous non-HIM-related tasks.

The challenge to a consultant in a situation like this one is to get some facts to help understand why a clerk is doing work usually assigned to others. Does the clerk have an appropriate job description? Do the administrator, business office manager, director of nurses and others in the facility have a clear understanding of the HIM duties? Is work volume manageable for the hours budgeted? Has the consultant done sufficient training of the clerk? Does the clerk have the tools necessary to perform her responsibilities? When the answers to these questions are yes, the consultant needs to observe more closely the relationship system.

In the example above, the HIM clerk was seriously over-functioning for the assistant director of nurses. The two shared an office and had become friendly co-workers. In time, the HIM clerk started helping the assistant director of nurses who frequently did not complete her own work on time. The HIM clerk believed that the

tasks of the nursing department were more important to the patients than her assigned HIM tasks. Feeling needed and very responsible, not wanting to disappoint her co-worker or her HIM consultant, the clerk tried to do her own work and extra work for her office-mate. She did so successfully for a while, but in time the assistant director began to rely more and more on the HIM clerk, regularly asking her to do tasks outside of the HIM scope of work.

HIM activities fell further behind and eventually the state-licensing surveyor cited the facility for medical record deficiencies. The facility had to pay a substantial fine. The clerk was devastated, the administrator angry, the consultant frustrated because her reports to the administrator regarding problems in the HIM function had been ignored, and the assistant director of nurses quit; not a very pleasant outcome for anyone.

The clerk and the assistant director of nursing were anxiously locked in a reciprocal relationship. Neither person realized that they had options. If the clerk had set appropriate limits and not taken on the nurse's responsibilities, the nurse would have found a way to do her own work, tried to resolve her problems through organizational channels or resigned. Any one of those options would have demonstrated the nurse was taking responsibility for herself, which is a higher level of functioning. Anxiety would have been contained rather than escalating over time and taking a toll on the entire organization. The clerk's heroic efforts contributed to undermining the functioning of both people in the relationship, and ultimately harmed the organization.

It is often difficult for an over-functioning person to believe that her behavior is as much a part of the problem as the individual who is failing to fulfill her own responsibilities. The consultant or manager who has a broader perspective, and views the workplace as a relationship system, can take a page from Phil Jackson's book and tell an over-functioning individual what Phil told Michael Jordan. "You've got to share the spotlight with your teammates because if you don't, they won't grow."

References

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