

Temporary Employees' Anxiety Can Undermine the Functioning of Others

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Outsourcing companies or independent contractors can affect a health information management (HIM) department like a miracle cure or a bad case of hives. Of course, they want to be as helpful as possible when providing services to catch up on a backlog, to fill in for an employee who is on sick leave or to provide the services of an entire function permanently. While important work gets accomplished, sometimes clients pay a high price in terms of their employees' emotional functioning. Both clients and outsourcing contractors must be aware that permanent or temporary workers do become part of the department's emotional system. Therefore, if an independent contractor or the contractor's employees are anxious, they can easily spread anxiety to their client's staff through triangles. (See "Emotional Process Is Played Out in Triangle," *ADVANCE*, April 12, 1999.)

The contractor's employees, though exhibiting anxious behavior, may still perform very well. However, as a result of the triangling process that people use to calm themselves, anxiety may be projected and expressed elsewhere in the system. More vulnerable members of the system, such as individuals lower in the hierarchy, those under unusual stress or those who are chronically anxious appear to pick up the anxiety projected by others. When the performance of an individual or a group in the department unexpectedly changes for the worse, it is useful to consider whether or not anxiety in other parts of the department or organization is being expressed through the poor performance in question.

How do you recognize "anxious temps"? Some signs of anxiety in temporary staff are excessive talking and complaining about their own personal situations, their boss, their assignments, their life on the road, etc. An "anxious temp" may get involved in office gossip, quickly getting hooked into triangles in the department. Temporary workers or permanently outsourced employees who are more positive present a higher and less anxious level of functioning. Individuals who function at the higher levels of emotional maturity are self-confident yet respectful of others. They listen carefully and are able to adapt to unexpected situations. They are clear about their responsibilities to their clients and to their employers. These individuals remain neutral in the presence of highly charged emotional issues and can resist the pull into departmental politics in the client facility. They are able to manage themselves effectively in the complexity of the three-way employment arrangement so common in today's workplace. They are consummate professionals.

Employees of companies doing permanent outsourcing of one department function must be most sensitive to the emotional process in their client organizations. Because their assignments are continuous, over time they inevitably become part of the emotional system at the client site. The long-term impact on the emotional system should be part of the contract evaluation process for outsourcing.

Case Study

A hospital outsources its release of information (ROI) function to a local correspondence company. The client site is staffed by two full-time equivalents (FTEs) on the day shift and by one FTE on the evening shift. From the start of the contract, the company's staff demonstrated excellent knowledge of ROI procedures and

provided superb service to the client's customers. However, the HIM director is concerned about staff morale in the area and is particularly concerned about the performance of the department's file room staff.

The outsourcing company's staff frequently talks about the poor benefits offered by their employer. They also complain about company management, specifically their regional manager. The file room staff who work adjacent to the ROI section are sympathetic, which encourages more complaining. When the regional manager makes visits to the client site, the department's employees are drawn into the pre- and post-visit gossiping about the manager. Over time, the HIM director observes there has been an overall deterioration in the file room staff's quality and productivity.

The HIM director has a difficult situation to resolve. Although the effects of emotional process are observable, it is hard to prove that a relationship exists between the anxious behavior of the ROI staff and the performance of the file room staff. Unless the director is a systems thinker, aware of emotional process (i.e., the automatic behaviors in a human relationship system), and can recognize anxiety-driven behavior, she might not even connect the performance of her file room staff to the behavior of the correspondence staff. Let's assume in this case that the HIM director does recognize the connection.

Drawing on the principles of Bowen Family System Theory discussed in earlier columns, let's see how the HIM director can approach the situation from the systems perspective. She can:

- Make the contractor and the contractor's employees aware of behavior that she does not consider appropriate for the workplace.
- Request a plan from the contractor and the employees to address the issue of appropriate behavior at the client site.
- Avoid taking sides in the triangle with the management of the company and its employees.
- Avoid creating an anxious triangle between herself, the file room staff and the contractor's staff.
- Carefully cultivate calm, thoughtful relationships between herself and the contractor, the contractor's employees and her own file room staff.

The key to successful change in this case is not to focus corrective action on the file clerks, but to address the source of the anxiety in the system. If anxiety in the ROI area is reduced, behavior will change there as well as in other parts of the system. As the whole system becomes calmer, staff in other parts of the department will function at a higher level.

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