

### **Projection: Anxiety Flows Downhill**

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

*Thank you to Advance Magazine for permission to use this article*

“Watch out for falling rocks,” is a road sign often seen by travelers visiting national parks and mountainous tourist areas. For consultants and temporary service staff, warning signs in client facilities should read, “Watch out for falling anxiety.”

The Bowen Family Systems Theory concept of “projection” describes a real hazard. The term “projection” describes the passing of anxiety from the top of a hierarchy downward.

The theory describes four automatic mechanisms that humans use in relationship systems to contain anxiety. These are conflict, distance, reciprocal functioning (over- and under-functioning) and projection. The first three describe behaviors between two individuals with a relationship problem. The fourth, projection, involves a third person.

The infectious nature of anxiety in a workplace system, a recurring theme in this column, suggests that anxiety is usually transmitted through “triangles” (i.e., sharing the anxiety with a third person through venting or gossiping relieves anxiety between two others). Interlocking triangles can transport the anxiety even further away from its source to a distant point in the organization. (See “Where Are You in Your Triangles?” ADVANCE, May 10, 1999.) Projection is a type of triangling in which two people have a problem in their relationship and instead of dealing with it directly, one of the people projects the anxiety generated by the problem onto another person. The third person absorbs the anxiety and expresses it through increasingly anxious behavior, thus functioning at a lower level. This phenomenon generally moves down the hierarchy. Thus, a child in a family system might suffer the fall-out from unresolved issues between parents, becoming a “problem child.” Similarly, in a workplace system, staff can act out the anxiety of unresolved relationship issues higher in the organization.

**Case Study:** This month’s case study examines how projection might be the real culprit in an unsuccessful temporary assignment.

A coding services company assigned a temporary coder to work on a backlog of coding for a new client. The hospital’s coding supervisor was limited on space and assigned the coder to work in a small room about the size of a closet. The area did not have windows; the lighting was dim, and the ventilation poor. The supervisor verbally instructed the coder on how to input diagnosis and procedure codes into the hospital’s information system and how to drop bills after coding. The hospital did not have written procedures for using the system.

The supervisor gave the coder a handwritten list of physician identification numbers, which was not alphabetized. The coder began coding and never saw the supervisor again for the rest of the day.

The coder completed 25 records and entered them into the hospital’s system throughout the day. The next day the supervisor told the coder that the business office manager was very upset because only four records

had been billed. Upon further investigation, the supervisor determined that the coder was not using the system properly to drop bills. She berated the coder, who was frustrated by a situation in which she was given no written guidelines and a very brief overview of a new system.

As the days went by, the coder continued to try harder and harder to please the client, but the supervisor became more and more displeased by the coder's performance. The coder's productivity ultimately decreased and she called the account manager at the coding company to report the problems she was having on this assignment.

The account manager called the health information management (HIM) director who had hired the coding company to discuss the issue. The HIM director immediately told the account manager, "...her supervisor has had problems with the temporary coder from day one." This confused the account manager, because the supervisor had not reported any problems to her when she had previously called to check on the temporary worker. In fact, the company's staff was caught in a situation that they, as outsiders, couldn't understand. They did not have a full picture of the system. They knew only that the behavior they were encountering was unusual and unpredictable, suggestive of a highly anxious system.

**Case Study Analysis:** What is not apparent in this case study is that the supervisor and the HIM director had a difficult relationship. They had significant differences about many HIM issues, but they did not address those issues directly. It was too risky. The supervisor needed her job because this was the only hospital in town; and the director needed the supervisor because there were so few experienced coders in the community. Neither of them was inclined to engage in conflict, distancing or reciprocal functioning to contain the anxiety. In fact, both professionals worked hard to make the department successful. That leaves the possibility that projection of anxiety onto the temporary worker was the adaptive behavior binding their relationship anxiety. They focused together on a "problem child."

There are no easy solutions here for either the manager or the temporary employee. Here are two possible approaches.

1. When, as a manager, you find yourself blind-sided by unexplainable behavior, try to get a broader view of the organization by thinking systems. If you are familiar with relationships in the organization, you might try to track the interlocking triangles up the organization chart. If you are part of an anxious relationship with another manager or a superior that has unresolved issues, double your efforts at improving that relationship. You may see positive results show up in your staff.

2. If you are a temporary worker or a consultant caught up in your client's anxiety, focus on your own ability to present a calm presence in the system. You do not necessarily have to understand the source of anxiety for a calm presence to help the organization's regular staff calm down and begin functioning at a higher level. Suspend judgment. Being aware that the behaviors in an anxious system are not intentionally hurtful can help you calm yourself enough to maintain your own functioning.

*Leslie Ann Fox is president of Care Communications Inc., Chicago, a national HIM staffing and consulting company. She invites readers to send their thoughts and opinions on this column via e-mail to [lfox@care-communications.com](mailto:lfox@care-communications.com).*