

Staffing Changes Impact Emotional Functioning in the Workplace

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The often-used adage “first impressions are important” barely touches the profound importance of how one enters a new relationship system. Even worse, one rarely hears that “last impressions are important,” yet they can spell success or failure for both the departing member of a work system, as well as for the future of the system being left.

One way to think about how changes in personnel affect functioning in a workplace system is to recognize that living systems seek homeostasis.

Dr. Edwin Friedman, an early proponent of applying principles of family system theory in the workplace, defined the concept of homeostasis in systems as “the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence.” (Friedman, Edwin H. *Generation to Generation*, The Guilford Press, New York, 1985, p. 23.) In other words, living systems tend to resist changes in their relationships. When homeostasis is disturbed, an imbalance in the system is created and anxiety in the system rises until balance is once again achieved.

Mergers, acquisitions and downsizing throughout the 1990s have caused extensive staffing changes, presenting a daunting challenge to manage the emotional impact of these changes. During transitions, because anxiety-driven behavior in the system is more pronounced, quality and productivity may be compromised. If separation from and entry into the organization are not well managed, the system may endure a prolonged period of anxiety and less than optimal functioning until homeostasis is once again achieved. Allowing adequate time for people to have emotional closure with a departing staff member is as important as having an inclusive welcoming and orientation period for newcomers.

Case Study

A health information management (HIM) firm responded to a call for an interim manager when the director of HIM at a large teaching hospital resigned due to a family situation. She could give only one week’s notice. The director had been at the hospital for two years and had carefully cultivated relationships with members of the medical staff and other key players in the hospital’s highly political organization. She was liked and respected by the HIM staff. She let everyone know she was devastated about leaving and worried about how they would manage without her. Adding to everyone’s sense of trauma was a plan to go live within two weeks following her departure with a new automated system for incomplete records and deficiency tracking.

The interim manager arrived a few days after the former director had left. The HIM staff had little time to prepare for the change and had been encouraged all during the previous week by the former director to keep a “stiff upper lip.” The interim manager felt compelled to immediately learn about the implementation plans for the new system. She was familiar with the system that was being installed and was alarmed by what she perceived as lack of preparation for the system’s implementation.

She quickly developed a new and improved implementation plan. Just as quickly, the project team rejected the new plan saying it would delay the go live date and consume too many resources not previously budgeted.

The installation went forward and the interim manager had to deal with the myriad problems that arose. Workflow changes that should have been anticipated created backlogs in the department. Physicians, who were not aware of the system change, became angry when they could not access records in their usual ways. The incomplete record count soared and business office and other administrative staff had to deal with the effects on billing and regulatory compliance. Finally, the hospital administrator contacted the HIM staffing firm to complain that the interim manager they had sent was ineffective. The interim manager felt she was a scapegoat. After all, she had warned them.

Case Study Analysis

The outcome might have been different if the HIM director and the interim manager had used principles of family systems theory to develop strategies for separation and entry into the system. The exiting director would have tried managing her own reactivity about the situation more calmly and thoughtfully. She would have allowed people more open communication about their sadness, providing an opportunity to bring closure to the relationship, and leaving people more open to a new relationship. She would have tried to be a non-anxious part of the transition process, offering a few days or weeks of availability by telephone to the interim director and staff. This would have given her the opportunity to take calm, neutral positions in the inevitable triangles of herself, the interim manager, and the department and hospital's staff, thus calming the system.

The interim manager's strategy would have included anticipating a high level of anxiety and planning to be a calm presence in the system. Though her concerns about the system implementation were accurate, she escalated the anxiety, which may have contributed in part to the poor outcome. Suggesting a revised plan made the former director look bad and created an uncomfortable triangle between her, the project team and the former director.

A family systems approach would have been to be less reactive to what she considered poor preparation. She might have tried to lower people's expectations about how quickly such systems become fully effective. She would have enlisted individual staff members and the project team members in helping her to prepare contingency plans to keep users calm just in case certain problems occurred. Thus, she would have avoided taking a position against the former director; rather, she would be reporting typical implementation problems. This approach would also have started the process of developing one-to-one relationships in which all parties could clearly define their roles and responsibilities in the service of the goals of the organization.

The functioning in relationship systems is at greatest risk at the beginning and at the end of relationships. However, such periods of transition are also great opportunities for individuals and the system to rise to a higher level of functioning.

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