

Systems Thinking Can Enhance, Encourage Your Leadership Development

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As this first year of the “Hands-on Help” column draws to a close, I want to thank my readers for your comments, questions and encouragement throughout the year. It is gratifying to realize that I have struck a chord with many of you by talking about the concepts of systems thinking and emotional process in the workplace. My goal was to raise awareness of the myriad new ways in which work is being accomplished, through third-party staffing, consulting and independent contractors working alongside regular HIM department staff. It was also to discuss the challenges of managing oneself in these relationships.

Using Bowen Family Systems Theory as a theoretical basis for thinking about relationships and presenting case studies throughout the year allowed us to explore many classic situations involving three-party work solutions. In this final column for the year, I explore my beliefs about the value of systems thinking in enhancing your role as a leader in your work system.

Leaders, including informal leaders, may emerge at any level in an organization to positively impact the functioning of a work system. Dr. Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self (discussed in the column “Differentiation Provides a Clear Vision of High Level Functioning,” July 5, 1999) is an important element in identifying characteristics of effective leaders. Well-differentiated people form opinions based on facts and communicate clearly their positions on issues. They are flexible, adapt well under stress, are able to stay connected to an anxious system without becoming reactive, are open to varying points of view, and are aware that their own emotional functioning affects the system.

This last point is particularly important because so much of leadership is about initiating change and guiding the system through the choppy waters that usually accompany change. Focus on self, rather than others, is critical because change is stressful. Increased stress in any system means increased anxiety in the system. The increased reactivity in the system brings the level of functioning down, at least temporarily. The ability of a leader to remain calm and stay fully connected to the system during times of stress brings functioning up and enables competent people to accomplish the work necessary to implement changes.

Case Study

The health information management (HIM) department director at a community hospital received a telephone call from the information systems (IS) department director informing her that the new, recently purchased hospital information system (HIS) came with a different encoding and grouping system than the one currently used by the coders. The IS director also indicated that the license for the old encoding system would not be renewed at the beginning of the new fiscal year, October 1st.

The HIM director would have only one month to implement the new encoder before the October 1st updates would make her old encoder obsolete.

As the HIM director put the phone down, she felt queasy, her heart started to race and she could hardly catch

her breath. She thought to herself, “How in the world could they have left her out of this decision? Why hadn’t she been informed earlier? Did they realize how this could affect the hospital’s cash flow if a coding backlog developed? Will her whole coding staff quit if they have to change to an entirely different type of encoder?” Her next thought was to charge out of her office and announce to the whole department that, “They did it to us again!”

Fortunately, there was a recent issue of ADVANCE for Health Information Professionals® lying open on her desk. She had just finished reading an article about how effective leaders remain calm and neutral, even under stress. So she stopped, took a deep breath and decided to call her best friend, who didn’t work at the hospital, so she could vent. Her friend listened quietly and said that it certainly sounded like a challenge but she was sure her director friend was up to it, and wished her good luck.

Having calmed herself down without spreading anxiety throughout her organization was an excellent first step. She got out of the primitive or “automatic pilot” section of her brain (the amygdala) and got into the thinking part (the neocortex).

She decided she needed to have a plan before she went to her staff with the news. She made a list of the tasks to be accomplished: get acquainted with the new product; determine how much customization could be done; identify how the new product would impact current processes; understand training needs; and numerous other activities for the next month. She spent the next day gathering the facts and calculating the cost of the conversion. Finally, she was ready to meet with people.

She met with her coding supervisor and the coders to tell them the news and to assure them that she had already started to develop a plan. She allowed them their initial moment of panic, acknowledged their fears about the change and encouraged them to vent as her friend had done for her.

Then she quietly assured them that working together as a team, she was confident they could successfully complete the conversion with minimal disruption to the rest of the department or the hospital. By the end of the meeting, her calm and thoughtful demeanor, her willingness to answer questions and to allow staff to make suggestions for the implementation plan had served to get everyone focused on the job at hand.

Family Systems Theory offers managers and employees a new way of thinking about their workplace that is both energizing and refreshing. They can use their understanding of the concepts in the theory to derive principles of leadership that will guide their actions in all types of workplace scenarios.

In next century’s “Hands-on Help” column, I will explore some of the principles of leadership that I strive to make part of my daily work life.

Happy holidays one and all.

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