

**Leadership Principle: Focus on Strength, not Pathology**

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As I bring to a close this five-part series of columns on leadership principles I derived based on Bowen Family Systems Theory, the last principle I wish to discuss, “focus on strength not pathology,” is based on an idea that at first seems counter-intuitive. The late Edwin Friedman, PhD, a leader in the application of systems thinking in organizations, wrote in his 1996 discussion guide, that “focus on empathy rather than responsibility is an emotional barrier to good leadership.” (See *Reinventing Leadership: Change in an Age of Anxiety*, published by The Guilford Press, New York.)

Books or articles on leadership usually cite “empathy” as an important quality or characteristic of leaders. However, reflecting on Dr. Friedman’s concept “The Fallacy of Empathy,” I think he has a valid point. Leaders in the workplace are responsible for inspiring colleagues and subordinates to achieve the goals of their organization, business unit or team, not for reinforcing weaknesses.

This line of thinking raises some interesting questions upon which to reflect. Is it more inspirational for individuals to be directed to dwell on their deficiencies, or “pathology,” or are leaders more motivational when they focus their thinking, and that of their colleagues, on the capacity of individuals and the group to meet the challenges they face? Does empathizing lead to feelings of helplessness and victim thinking in both leaders and those they guide, as Dr. Friedman asserts?

We know from earlier articles in this series that at times of high anxiety in a system, the level of functioning of the individuals will likely diminish to some degree. While I think it is sensible and honest to acknowledge the source of anxiety and the challenges that a group faces, it doesn’t help move the organization forward if the leader is focused solely on the weaknesses of individuals or the group. Guiding people to think about the available resources, as well as the strengths, abilities and resiliency in the system balances the way one thinks about a situation and creates a more objective picture, thus calming the system and enhancing its functioning. For example, if you are shipwrecked and wash ashore on a deserted island with fellow passengers, your group has the best chance for survival if they inventory their resources and think creatively about how to use them rather than bemoaning the fact that they don’t have a boat.

**Case Study: AHIMA “Playing to Strength” in the Year 2000**

The year 2000 is proving to be one of the most challenging in recent memory for HIM professionals. HIM managers are coping with the implementation of the Health Care Financing Administration’s (HCFA) Outpatient Prospective Payment System (OPPS)—with ambulatory payment classifications (APCs) and E&M coding—the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and peer review organization (PRO) compliance audits, the impending Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations, and the endless migration to computerized patient records. At the same time, they have critical shortages in personnel, and must address demands for better salaries, more flexible schedules and requests for telecommuting. The Internet has burst forth, making significant inroads in changing our paradigms by offering completely new ways for HIM work to be accomplished remotely. Meanwhile, HIM schools are being challenged in keeping current

with the rapid pace of the changes as well as struggling to recruit students and faculty for HIM programs. It's enough to make a grown person cry. Who wouldn't want to empathize?

However, more than empathy, we need leaders who can inspire, motivate and stimulate creative thinking to meet these challenges. Fortunately, we know the HIM profession is steeped in a tradition of creating solutions, because an organization doesn't endure for nearly a century if it hasn't been adaptive and creative. Today's American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) leadership is indeed focusing on our strengths to lead us, like Moses, out of the wilderness. Recognizing that AHIMA's members, 40,000 strong, have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share, AHIMA is implementing a new functional model for our organization to leverage that expertise. Embracing the promise of the Internet, AHIMA is launching Communities of Practice. Playing to the strengths of the organization's members, all AHIMA members will be able to actively participate in a variety of online communities that will allow them to work interactively with peers across the country on practice issues related to their work setting, job function and current regulatory issues. This is an example of a leadership that respects the talents of its members, and expects every member to play a responsible role in keeping the HIM flame shining brightly and creating our profession's future.

### Summary: Principles of Leadership Based on Systems Theory

To recap the principles I have presented in this year's five columns on leadership...

1. Focus on self, not others; always seek to observe how your behavior impacts the system and what role you play in its problems; take responsibility for your own emotional maturity; strive to be a non-anxious presence in your system, and remember that serenity is as contagious as anxiety.
2. Work continuously on differentiation of self; know where one's own responsibility begins and ends; know your own beliefs and communicate expectations clearly; hold self and others accountable; and look at issues from all sides.
3. Be present and accounted for in the relationship system; stay engaged and resist the urge to cut-off in response to reactivity in the system; and keep thinking.
4. Observe the emotional system, reflect and take action; observe triangles; be aware of anxiety-driven behaviors, focusing on process, not the content of a situation; anticipate reactivity to your actions, and plan for ways to tolerate and diffuse it rather than allowing the reactivity to sabotage your actions.
5. Play to the strengths of the individuals in the systems; be aware of weaknesses in others but focus attention on their abilities, resourcefulness, creativity and resiliency.

The next time you are inclined to criticize a direct report, or to offer "constructive feedback," reconsider and try an experiment. Point out the individual's most outstanding skills, or express admiration for her most attractive professional characteristic. Observe how the person functions over the next few days. You may be in for a pleasant surprise.

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