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EHR Reaches Its 'Tipping Point'

By Leslie Ann Fox, MA, RHIA, and Patty Thierry, MBA, RHIA, CCS

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Leslie: In 2000 Malcolm Gladwell wrote a fascinating book called *The Tipping Point*. The "tipping point" is that magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire. When we look back on the summer of 2003, I believe we will say this is the year that the electronic health record (EHR) reached its tipping point.

Patty: Health information management (HIM) professionals have long believed that EHRs were just around the corner. But as decade after decade passed without widespread development and adoption of EHRs, this belief seemed to become more and more an impossible dream. Why do you think we have reached the tipping point now?

Leslie: Gladwell shows in his book that what appears to be non-related, independent small events can make a big difference. Several things have happened over the past few years that have converged to catapult the EHR into the limelight. One may argue whether or not they are "small" events, however, the accumulation of independent efforts made by individuals and several coalitions of public and private groups throughout the country has built up enough steam to capture the attention of the federal government.

Patty: You must be referring to the fact that earlier this year the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) directed the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and HL7, a national data standards organization, to design a functional model of an EHR. It is expected that DHHS will use the model in future demonstration projects to evaluate incentives regarding the use and implementation of the EHR.

Leslie: Yes, I am referring to the HHS request for the EHR functional model. Several national groups have been influential in bringing us to this tipping point. Through their organized initiatives we are seeing great examples of collaborative leadership, and the imagination and vision that emerges from such leadership.

Patty: I am happy to report that our own professional association, the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) is actively involved in these collaborative activities. AHIMA is a member of the eHealth Initiative and the EHR Collaborative. It is also a member of the Steering Committee for The Markle Foundation's Connecting for Health and had representatives on all three of their Working Groups. Further, AHIMA's eHIM initiative, which came out of the work of the eHealth Task Force last year, is being lauded by organizations in the industry.

Leslie: That's right. AHA News Now reported recently, "The National Alliance for Health Information Technology is applauding AHIMA's recent announcement that it has begun to develop best practice guidelines for the EHR." I am really proud of our association for their leadership presence. It says in effect, HIM professionals are front and center in this movement to accelerate the adoption of the EHR.

Patty: Now it is up to individual HIM professionals to replicate the leadership presence that AHIMA has had at the national level by contributing to the advancement of the EHR in their own organizations. HIM professionals will find it valuable to monitor the activities of all these collaborative groups.

Leslie: The AHIMA EHR standards will provide guidance, through HIM professionals, to the entire health care industry. These standards produced by the AHIMA eHIM task forces this past summer will help HIM professionals contribute to advancing the EHR in their organizations. The standards include guidelines on a complete medical record in a hybrid EHR environment, implementing e-signatures, provider/patient communications, document management, physician practice core data sets and speech recognition.

Patty: Although AHIMA is providing us with tools, it will be up to individual HIM professionals to develop the necessary relationships in their organizations that will enable them to fully participate in the creation of the EHR.

Leslie: This is a good point Patty. Relationships are fundamental to leadership. I have had numerous conversations with HIM professionals who are frustrated with not being involved in their organization's EHR strategy. Leadership is a reciprocal relationship process, and not having good collaborative relationships leads to this frustration of exclusion. To prepare for a greater leadership role in the important eHIM/EHR initiatives, HIM professionals may need to develop a strategy for changing their relationships with key individuals or departments in the organization.

Patty: Sounds like politics to me!

Leslie: Well, politics are all about relationships too! Successful politicians get things done by alliance and coalition building. Successful leaders have a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to the good of the group that comes from their own solid sense of self. Challenged by difficult situations, they persevere and remain engaged in relationships to find solutions.

Patty: We agree that a relationship strategy is important to successful collaborative leadership. Where does one start?

Leslie: I would suggest starting by assessing current relationships with key players, medical staff, nursing, administration, information technology, and the ancillary departments, etc. After all, the EHR touches everyone.

Patty: What would you assess about each relationship?

Leslie: I would reflect on several aspects of the relationship. Is there trust? Respectful communications? Is there sufficient interaction between the parties to address serious issues, to exchange ideas, to stimulate creative thinking? I would reflect on whether or not the relationship is distant or conflictual. Do you look forward to meetings in which you will be working on solving problems, or do you and the other person avoid each other because it is just too difficult to work together? Do you frequently complain about another department or department director to your colleagues? That would certainly be a sign of a failing relationship.

Patty: When HIM professionals are feeling shut out or cut off from the EHR activities by departments with whom they do not have good relationships, how can they turn those situations around?

Leslie: Because the only person one can change is oneself, the motivated HIM professional will look inward to understand what his or her role is in the relationship difficulties. One must ask, how can I manage myself

differently in the relationship to enable us to work together more successful? It is a huge step for one to admit that both parties share responsibility for the success or failure of a relationship.

Patty: I think it is also critical that HIM professionals tell their direct superiors of the need for HIM to be involved. Educate that person about the importance of the HIM perspective. They should ask their superiors what it would take to become more involved in the EHR activities. They should also identify other potential allies in the organization who would appreciate the HIM perspective, such as key members of the medical staff, nursing, etc.

Leslie: EHR initiatives will offer many opportunities for creative and collaborative relationships. For motivated HIM professionals, redefining themselves in important relationships will greatly enhance their ability to be successful contributors to the EHR.

Patty: And, let's not forget about assessing relationships with the HIM staff. HIM professionals must reflect on how well they motivate employees, how well they create independent, mature relationships rather than dependent relationships, and how well they stay connected with their staff during turbulent times.

Leslie: The transition to the EHR will impact the lives and the livelihoods of all HIM employees. Transformative change begins with a process of mourning the loss of the "old way of doing things." Successful leaders will honor the past and acknowledge the loss, while painting a clearer picture of the future.

Patty: HIM leaders will be counseling employees to create professional development paths that will enable them to take a place in the new electronic practice environment. Many new roles will emerge for HIM professionals as information technology and HIM become more interdependent.

Leslie: For example, part of the EHR vision is that the role of patients in HIM will change as the EHR enables patients to access and control their personal health information. The HIM role of consumer advocate is one likely to emerge and grow, as consumers need to be educated about privacy and security issues, and how to use the EHR technology.

Patty: This discussion has taken us through many aspects of leadership. From national leadership, to organizational leadership, to personal leadership into our professional future, I would conclude that successful transformative leadership depends on solid, respectful relationships, imaginative and creative collaboration, cooperation and adaptability.

Leslie: Yes! Charles Darwin couldn't have said it better!

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