

Call for Coding Leadership Strengthens December 15, 2008

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Leslie: It has been life in the fast lane for HIM professionals this past year! Continued progress in the migration to EHRs and computer-assisted coding (CAC), increased emphasis on coding and revenue integrity and the upcoming proposed implementation of ICD-10 in 2011 has kept everyone on the move.

Patty: Yes, and all of those issues are having a tremendous impact on coding and data management activities. In fact, they are leading to a transformation of the coding function that even surpasses the changes we saw after DRGs were implemented in 1983.

Leslie: Good point Patty. In looking over the columns that we wrote in 2008, I was surprised to realize eight of the 10 columns dealt with how coding is changing and will change further in the next few years.

Patty: It seemed to just be on everyone's minds. However, leadership is one aspect related to the coding transformation that we didn't discuss in much detail this year.

Leslie: Perhaps we did focus more on understanding the specifics of the technology, the regulations and the challenges that the coding industry has in preparing for the new age of coded data. However, the year isn't over and we can take this last 2008 column to back up a bit and talk about the importance of HIM professionals taking some time to think about how they are leading during a time that is both exciting and very challenging. Let's start by defining what we mean by coding leadership.

Patty: I am interested in learning how HIM professionals are creating the urgency necessary to get the executives to whom they report, as well the coding staff, to envision a new future for the coding function. What models are emerging for collaborating with physicians, quality management, case management and revenue integrity in creating the future state of coding? Is there a vision of new coding roles and functions that goes beyond traditional coding to include collaboration in areas where the unique knowledge and expertise of coding professionals will be most needed?

Leslie: Through the year, as we explored the impact of technology, new regulations and the coming changes in the coding system, we learned that with or without a clear vision that is embraced by everyone in the organization, new roles are already evolving. For example, some health care organizations have added a coding educator or clinical documentation specialist to educate both coders and providers about changes in coding and documentation rules. I think HIM professionals are providing the leadership to support new roles as the needs arise, but to your point, I don't know if these changes are occurring in the context of a larger vision of coded data that is aligned with the strategic direction of their organizations.

Patty: We also learned from people we interviewed throughout the year that coders of the future will need more than their coding expertise to succeed. The point was often made that they will need excellent

communication skills and the ability to work collaboratively with a multidisciplinary team of clinical and administrative professionals responsible for the accuracy of medical record documentation and coded data. These are important aspects of leadership and moving toward more collaborative working relationships is an important part of a new coding vision.

Leslie: Individual visioning is important too as coding professionals think about their personal futures. Being adaptable will be critical; and being committed to life-long learning necessary because things are not going to slow down any time soon. Coding professionals who see where they fit in the broader organization will be well positioned to contribute their coding expertise today and well into the future.

Patty: At the beginning of the year we asked our readers to tell us what titles they saw in the future for coding professionals. We received responses such as clinical coding analyst, data entry coders, data entry clerk, CAC auditing specialist, data verifiers, data integrity support specialists, data integrity auditors and computer assisted coders.

Leslie: Add to that list terminology asset manager, research abstractor, health record reviewer. These titles suggest a range of positions are already being envisioned. However, perhaps we should have asked where will these people work within a health care provider organization and to whom will they report? Will they still work in an HIM department, or will they be spread around, some working in compliance departments, some in quality management, case management, information systems or revenue integrity?

Patty: Let's not forget, many coders do not work in provider organizations. Coders are employed by health care plans, accounting firms, recovery audit contractors, EHR vendors and of course outsourcing companies, to mention just a few. Their roles will also be in a state of flux as things change in provider organizations.

Leslie: It's great there is a broader range of job opportunities becoming available to coding professionals. Their expertise in terminologies and mapping will be needed in creating and maintaining the CAC technology that will be enabled by widespread adoption of the EHR. Their clinical knowledge, along with a mastery of reimbursement rules and regulations, will be invaluable in helping to build smart EHRs, systems that will improve the quality of physician documentation practices.

Patty: Leading an organization, leading from whatever seat you sit in, and leading an industry through the sea of change that is coming at coding requires people who have the leadership skills to manage the anxiety that inevitably arises during times of transformative change. Clarifying the coding futures vision, having strategic conversations with superiors, colleagues and staff, and communicating calmly and thoughtfully about how the world of coding is indeed changing, is an important way of providing leadership.

Leslie: It is imperative that HIM professionals be "present and accounted for" in any discussions or decisions about the future of coding. This is an issue that HIM professionals need to keep raising. We all need to be educating others about the new world of coded data. Oftentimes just being present and putting out clear positions based on facts are all that one needs to do to make a difference in the direction an organization takes as it works to define the future state of creating and using coded data.

Patty: I also think coding professionals will need to continuously deepen their leadership acumen to more easily navigate these complex and increasingly collaborative times. I think coding leadership success will be more closely linked to the collaborative relationships that are forged by coding professionals than to the technical expertise they impart. Although both technical expertise and the ability to manage oneself in relationships are needed, technical expertise in the absence of solid, open and honest relationships often fails to result in being part of decision-making and being at the table.

Leslie: Sounds like we will be talking more about the challenge of leadership and leadership development next year! One of my favorite topics!

Next year marks the 10-year anniversary of this column. It's a milestone we look forward to celebrating with our readers as we discuss the HIM trends and challenges each month. We wish our readers a very "present and accounted for" holiday season and the very best to you in the New Year.

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