

Can HIM Leaders Create a Culture of Calm?

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LESLIE: When we talk with our HIM colleagues lately, I am struck by the intensity of our conversations. I hear both excitement and dread. The challenges we face in HIM today are exhilarating, helping us to stretch and grow professionally. They present a golden opportunity to lead important change in our organizations. At the same time today's challenges do not represent incremental change, but rather change of a transformational nature. We know that during times of such significant change and transition organizational anxiety escalates.

PATTY: Yes, the transition to electronic health records (EHRs), the upcoming conversion to ICD-10 CM/PCS, new regulatory requirements related to meaningful use, and privacy and security, are particularly anxiety provoking. They are shaking up long standing ways of accessing and using health information. During times of transformational change, I am reminded of our many discussions about the importance of non-anxious leadership in organizations undergoing large scale change.

LESLIE: One of the interesting aspects of studying anxiety in organizations is that the patterns of behavior that we observe are universal, so there is much we can learn from looking to organizations outside of our own industry. Let me give you an example from the field of education that I came across recently.

On March 7, 2011, the Chicago Tribune's front-page article, "A Long View for Schools" (<http://tinyurl.com/6emx9lc>), featured an interview with Terry Mazany, interim Chicago Public Schools chief. The article allowed Mazany to promote his new vision for the Chicago Public Schools. He began by describing the organization that he took over just over 3 months ago -- a system he observed to be in "free fall," where employee morale was plunging, with vacancies in key leadership positions and a "balkanized organization structure where each unit was doing their own thing." The system "lacked a unifying vision for education." This didn't surprise me because it has had three top executives in the last 2 years. Mazany's observations were symptoms of an anxious organization.

PATTY: Leslie, those are symptoms of anxiety that could very well describe some healthcare organizations we have encountered.

LESLIE: That's exactly my point. Mazany's vision for the Chicago Public Schools may or may not be the best vision; others will decide that in the future. However, his view of leadership really caught my attention. His principles of leadership are closely aligned with Systems-Based Leadership as Katharine Baker and I described in our book *Leading a Business in Anxious Times*. Most important, he is clearly aware that reactivity is compromising performance and recognizes the importance of creating a calmer environment.

PATTY: How did Mazany go about trying to calm such an anxious system?

LESLIE: The article states, "Over the last 3 months, Mazany said he has worked to repair some of the strained

relationships between the central office and its employees and to bring his own 'culture of calm.'" I was curious as to how this thoughtful interim leader would bring a "culture of calm" to this troubled school system. As I learned more about what he has done and how he operates, the principles of Systems-Based Leadership seemed to leap off the page.

PATTY: What are those principles?

LESLIE: I will highlight a few. He focused his attention on gathering facts about what is working and what is not working. He developed a clear vision and expectations that can serve as a road map for the next chief of schools. He stepped up and defined his own positions. For example he stated, "I'm absolutely convinced this is the right work, the right thing to do." He said that he doesn't want to be just an interim caretaker. He is operating according to his own inner guidance system, his core principles. Whether he leads for one more day or one more year, he has the self-knowledge and the courage to let others know what he believes is right. He takes his role as interim leader seriously and lives the principle of being present and accounted for in the system.

PATTY: As I hear you describe Mazany, I see other principles of systems-based leadership in the words and deeds of this leader. He has a broad awareness of the functioning of the organization as an emotional system and has made calming the system a priority. He is neither anxious nor passive, but rather a passionate leader who is confident that with a clear vision and a detailed action plan, the organization can begin to achieve better outcomes for the school children of Chicago.

LESLIE: When leaders focus on facts and not feelings, articulate a clear vision for which they have a passion, and have the courage to step up and state their positions clearly and publicly, others in the organization can also think more clearly about the issues and challenges. A real dialogue can ensue. With a calmer, more thought environment, an organization is more flexible, more productive and more resilient.

PATTY: What about individuals who don't have a position of authority, even a temporary position as Mazany did?

LESLIE: Leadership is not the same as authority. In our book we stated, "Successful leadership is a relationship process among members of an organization that inspires them to take full advantage of opportunities, recognize and minimize threats to success and avoid catastrophic failures." Thus, individuals can choose to lead from any position in the organization. Leadership is very much about being a non-anxious presence, so that others become calmer and better able to think through the challenges they face.

PATTY: It is helpful to remember that anxiety is contagious, but so is being calm. By each of us managing our own anxiety within our sphere of influence, a culture of calm can begin to take root. I encourage our readers to reflect on how they can use the principles of Systems-Based Leadership to calm the reactivity around the big changes in HIM. (Take this short self-assessment.)

LESLIE: Good idea, Patty. Developing a plan for managing our own anxiety as we lead during this time of incredible change will help us each to keep thinking more and reacting less.

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