Teams as the Key to Organizational Communication

Paul Preston, Ph.D., professor of management, The University of Montevallo, Montevallo, Alabama

People do great things in healthcare organizations. Good communication is the first step to ensuring that those people show up to do the work. You communicate to gather people together, to explain the purpose or goal for the gathering, to answer and ask questions, to gain buy-in, to ward off resistance, and ultimately to achieve the institution's and department's goals. Because healthcare work requires the effort of many people, the concept of teams is addressed in this first installment of the communication column. Without teamwork, communication and sharing of information is limited, which leads to generally poor outcomes.

Hospitals and healthcare facilities are surrounded by teams and functional groups; team nomenclature is firmly rooted in our vocabulary. For all kinds of obvious reasons, teams make sense in the provision of medical care and the processing of myriad clinical and administrative activities. Of course, we also live in a world created and operated by teams.

Yet, there seems to be considerable managerial resistance within healthcare organizations to wider acceptance of and more reliance on team collaboration. Other than in areas where teams are clearly necessary and appropriate, the general preference is for people to work by themselves alongside others who do similar work. When individual work is emphasized, we lose the synergy that comes from collaboration and the shared commitment to the patients and the institution. We erect "stovepipes" that restrict the full and free flow of information and communication throughout the organization.

BARRIERS TO TEAM BUILDING

The following managerial behavior patterns and attitudes signal resistance to the development and widespread use of teams:

1. Distrust of interdependence. Most healthcare managers rise to a position of prominence in their organizations through a combination of personal skill and ability to work well with others. They are products of a highly refined system. Thus, a firm sense of interdependence with others may seem to be a given for managers, but it is not. After a while, some managers begin to believe that their continued success depends on their independent actions and accomplishments. Then, they begin to distrust others around them. These managers know they need others, but they fear their need for help will be taken as a sign of their personal or managerial weakness.

2. Unfamiliarity with staff's actual contributions. Many managers are aware of their employees' job descriptions within the department, but they either do not

know or do not want to know the ideal roles their staff can play in the wider organization. Managerial ignorance is sometimes a result of overwork or having too little time to manage what employees are actually doing. Another possible cause of being unaware is the manager's fear that close supervision will destroy an otherwise effective delegation system.

The human resources director of a major health system shared with me an experience she had using a simple exercise she learned in a seminar. The exercise was simple: have subordinates write out their own informal job descriptions, stating what jobs they do everyday and how they do them. This executive discovered that her staff were involved in all kinds of things she had not anticipated. As a result of her findings, this executive now regularly asks her employees for an updated job description. With this document, she can monitor the staff's current jobs and find areas in which more cooperative team activities can be incorporated.

3. *Aversion to planning.* Managers are usually action oriented; they like to see things happening. They know the importance of planning, but they favor getting things done now, avoiding planning altogether. Without plans to act as guidelines, staff still do their best at getting their jobs done, or they do what they think ought to be done. Although this practice is functional, it is not teamwork; it is merely an individual effort performed in a group setting. Most importantly, work produced by individuals is usually not as effective as work by a well-managed team. Building and managing effective teams require a lot of planning, something at which many managers fail.

4. *Attraction to staying busy.* Most of us would rather *do* something than plan or work out details. This preference for action often leads to an "activity trap," in which we are caught with doing everything to stay busy that we overlook the bigger goals. This behavior comes from feeling left out of the day-to-day activities. Instead of delegating, the manager often takes away from teams the work they should be doing. When managers do all of the assignments themselves, they get the satisfaction of the "small victories" that come with completing a task. They can see the immediate outcomes of their actions and decisions. When leading a team, however, seeing and enjoying the completion of a responsibility is not immediate, and the frequent satisfactions go instead to the team members. The manager's satisfaction comes only when an entire project or assignment is finished.

Organizational structure is another major barrier to the development and use of teams. Although often beyond the control of individual managers, the design of the organization affects the habits and attitudes of management.

Every day, hospitals and healthcare organizations struggle to rely on teams. They face infighting, internal friction, unnecessary intraorganizational competition, and narrow mind-sets, all of which interfere with lateral and collaborative communication. Individual departments, and their managers, jealously guard their turf. When departmental boundaries are high and defended, working in cross-functional or patient-focused teams becomes difficult for employees: their allegiance to the team is undercut by the need to maintain their position in their

"home" department. Some employees who participate in cross-functional or patient-focused teams actually fear that their future within their home department is threatened because of their team involvement.

When this happens, the effectiveness of the teams, as well as the morale of the employees, is compromised and team productivity suffers. When institutions and their managers make cross-functional teams the equal (in status) of standing departments, these fears are minimized. Members then are more willing to commit themselves to the team and its objectives.

STRATEGIES FOR TEAM BUILDING

Team building is essential to better organizationwide communication. Thus, a well-thought-out team-building effort across the organization is fundamental. Here are suggestions toward such an effort:

- *Regularly and frequently schedule team-building sessions.* Clinical and administrative professionals in healthcare are not natural team players. Typically, they want to fit into a niche, do their work conscientiously, and protect their turf. It is not easy for them to change their view of their colleagues. Team-building attempts with such individuals cannot be a one-time occurrence. If management does not regularly and frequently schedule team-building sessions, these employees will soon forget the teamwork skills they have learned and revert to their old, natural behavior. The dynamics of team are truly remarkable, making way for "bosses" to become "coaches" and giving staff members who have never worked together a chance to collaborate and become a cohesive unit. Such a team culture is a welcome change from the typical organizational structure that encourages division and differentiation.
- *Emphasize team building to be satisfying and fun for all involved.* Team-building activities should involve elements of self-discovery, which allow employees to realize their own contributions to the big organizational picture. Team-building efforts should also highlight the talents and skills of team members to give others a chance to develop a deep appreciation for their colleagues.
- *Base team-building efforts on trust.* To borrow from physics, trust is the strong force that binds the atoms of a team. Members are going to have to rely on each other in moments of stress and confusion. Like a trapeze artist sailing off a swing, a team member needs to know that someone will be on the other end to catch him or her. This trust is possible only through enriched and more effective communication, which is a continuing challenge for managers.

In future installments of this column, we will examine ways to improve communication skills, whether in teams or in one-to-one interactions.

For more information on the concepts in this column, please contact Paul Preston at PrestonP@montevallo.edu.