

Benchmarking a World-class Image

Save to myBoK

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This time of year may find us longing for a chair by a cozy fireplace or lounging on a sunny beach. When we find time for reflection, it's good to periodically reflect on ourselves and the image that we project as HIM professionals.

Authority Robert Camp defines benchmarking "as a search for industry best practices that lead to superior performance."¹ We are not always successful in being objective about ourselves, but in today's spirit of benchmarking, it's beneficial to look at role models not only within our profession but in other venues.

The goal here is not benchmarking processes for operational change, but rather exploring our own personal and professional performance. There is a Japanese word, "dantotsu," which means "striving to be the best of the best."² Every day, we face at least one event, situation, challenge, in which we could take a different approach or risk, trying something new instead of doing something that might seem ordinary or routine. This can happen as you carry out a routine task, tackle a problem, manage family chores, or work on a hobby. It means finding new approaches to problem solving, motivation, leadership, or simply doing a good job better and enjoying it.

A Change for the Better

Our image was conveyed to me recently by a good-humored cardiologist who spoke of the HIM director as "the Gestapo" with more power than the chief of medicine, focused on discipline, procedure, and prevention with the clinical staff. This approach may get successful results, but it is certainly not an image of the organization of which I desire to serve as president. Somehow, we may have missed the point that we can carry out our responsibilities to our organization, patients, and customers through facilitation and education rather than wielding overt power. By analyzing work flow and information needs from the user's perspective and seeking new methods and technologies to support that work flow at a different point in the process, we might generate a more positive image of our work and ourselves.

Henry Mintzberg is well known for his theories on sophisticated innovation and strategic decision making, which are based in creativity, intuition, and judgment. In a recent article, he examines the leadership styles of professionals.³ He explores the managerial leadership of an orchestra conductor while specifically identifying similarities among other organizations of professionals. These included consulting firms and healthcare organizations, which are structured around the work of highly trained individuals who know what they have to do and how to do it—much like a symphony orchestra. The conductor's role is that of a project manager, coordinating the skills of the musicians to make beautiful music.

True, almost everything in a symphony is highly standardized by tradition or rules, but what makes us return to hear the same concerto played by different orchestras or conductors? It's the promise that we might hear an inspiring new rendition, a vibrant arrangement, or a stirring performance. It's an outcome that summarizes the contributions of everyone involved, but with some element of variation or surprise.

No matter what our job is, each of us is a trained, skilled HIM professional. Depending on your role in the workplace, think of yourself as either a musician in the orchestra or a conductor. Although productivity standards or objectives may specifically discipline your performance, think what the overall outcome of your role means to your organization and to healthcare in general.

For example, if you are a coder, your role:

- supports the financial basis of the organizational reimbursement process
- feeds data that ultimately describes and quantifies the outcomes of care

- creates an organized subset of each patient's healthcare experience through coding and abstracting key information for a database

These are weighty responsibilities, which you strive to fulfill. But you need the overall orchestration of a good leader or conductor to see that the full arrangement of HIM services is delivered in a timely, accurate way.

As conductors, HIM professionals ensure that trained professionals demonstrate their abilities and maintain a high level of excellence. Mintzberg mentions how important linking is to successful managers.⁴ For an orchestra conductor, linking involves making the connections to subscribers, patrons, and corporate sponsors for support and funding. For HIM professionals in varied roles, linking may include dealing with regulatory agencies, customers, or vendors on the outside, and physicians, other department managers, HIM staff, colleagues, or senior executives internally. Regardless, the responsibility to mix and meet internal and external demands with confidence and creativity is fundamental to outcomes and to the image we project.

Elements of Success

As you benchmark roles and behavior by looking beyond the familiar into the worlds of business, the arts, religion, education, etc., I would encourage you to be open, curious, and observant. View successful outcomes, then try to detect the behaviors and approaches that help to achieve or cultivate those outcomes. Could those approaches be adaptable to you and your workplace? What key elements make them appealing or successful? What skills are needed, and do you have them? If not, are they attainable, where, and how?

Management expert Tom Peters notes, "The problem is never how to get new ideas into your mind, but how to get the old ones out." Along these lines, he advises: "Read odd stuff; look anywhere for ideas; try different combinations to shake things up."⁵

I encourage all of you to seek new role models outside your sphere of influence for ideas. Let's work on our image together, as it speaks to who we are individually and collectively as AHIMA. Although we are hard to define as a profession, we have tremendous breadth of knowledge, talent, education, and expertise in many areas. We need creativity in projecting a new world-class image of HIM professionals, and we need to start today "to shake things up."

Notes

1. Camp, Robert. *Benchmarking: The Search for Industry Best Practices That Lead to Superior Performance*. Milwaukee, WI: ASQC Quality Press, 1989.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Mintzberg, Henry. "Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals." *Harvard Business Review* (November-December 1998): 140-147.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Peters, Tom. *The Circle of Innovation: You Can't Shrink Your Way to Greatness*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

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