

Communicating Change with Style

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by Susan Helbig, MA, RHIA

With so many different types of changes occurring at so many different times in the work place, how does an HIM professional prepare the context for change? Context refers to both the circumstances in which change will occur and to those the change will affect, such as the HIM staff, administration, physician and clinical staff, information technology staff, the governing board, and support staff. It does not matter whether the change is forced or voluntary—this community of people will benefit from early communication about the change.

Even though any type of change may be difficult, the HIM professional must appreciate the differences between forced and voluntary change. This article will explain the differences and provide advice on how to communicate changes to your colleagues.

Forced Change

In HIM, forced change most often occurs when outside forces mandate some type of alteration in the way we practice. Past examples of forced change include DRG and APC implementations, Joint Commission information management standard revisions, and individual state regulation changes in required data elements for clinical documents. HIPAA implementation is a current example of forced change. An example of a potential future forced change is the movement from coding in the ICD-9-CM system to ICD-10.

Forced change almost always has deadlines and, possibly, penalties if the deadlines are not met. This might add to the anxiety level of the change. Forced change can also occur from within the organization. For example, there might be a need for more clinical space, requiring an HIM department to move to another location. Or perhaps the laboratory information system is being updated and the update requires re-programming of the electronic health record system to which the results are sent.

Voluntary Change

Voluntary change occurs when someone makes a decision to carry out something differently within an organization in hopes of improving a process or outcome. It may come about because market forces are creating the need to stay competitive. It may be a simple or complex change.

Moving workstations to change workflow, setting up a coding contract to supplement in-house coding, and convincing the CIO to free up programmer resources to program transcription counting software to ensure consistent, accurate invoicing from a transcription vendor are examples of both simple and complex voluntary changes.

Communication Style

Whether the change is forced or voluntary, immediate, soon, or in the future, how you frame your message is key to garnering interest, support, or a firm commitment from various stakeholders. Communication about any upcoming change must be approached with respect and sensitivity because sometimes even the idea of a change can upset a few of those involved. The HIM professional needs to be aware of his or her role.

Your role as messenger, advocate, or change agent determines the appropriate communication style necessary to relay the change to others. Each role requires communication that builds respect for those involved. The ability to listen and speak directly to the issues being raised is a necessity in all three roles.

As a messenger, you may simply be required to provide clear information about a coming change. (You may have to work through any negative or resistant feelings you have yourself in order to positively communicate the situation to others.)

As an advocate, you will need to create enthusiasm in yourself and others. Identify why the change is good and how it will help those around you. Once again, you may need to identify your own resistance or negativity in order to create positive communication in favor of the change.

As a change agent charged with the management of a total project, you will need to learn and use change agent techniques. Again, in preparing a positive context for change, you may need to overcome your own resistance and negativity to the change and your own feelings toward those who may not agree with the change.

Depending on the content and scope of the change, there are usually several audiences. Each of these audiences may require a separate communication strategy. Some will be directly affected by the change and some will not. In all cases, you need to have a clear vision of the desired outcome. Creating a context for change involves engaging the intellect and imagination of all the players. Support for change is dependant on how the players envision their roles and possible benefits for themselves or their programs.

Resistance as an Asset

Expect resistance and respect the resisters. By listening to those in opposition to a particular change, you may be able to ease their concerns. The communication process begins with a dialogue between you and the individuals or groups affected by the change. It is your responsibility to initiate the dialogue. This dialogue is essential to refining the vision and identifying problems and barriers.

Resistance can be an asset to the process because it identifies weaknesses in the project. If concerns are openly addressed and acknowledged, the communication process itself can establish strong proponents and allies. Even though it is unlikely that you can meet everyone's expectations, the fact that you have heard and seriously considered objections may lower the overall resistance, and you may have a better process and outcome. Dealing directly and positively with resistance is especially necessary when trying to implement forced changes over which you have no control and little, if any, flexibility. Cooperation is always better than confrontation.

By carefully communicating change to others within your organization and understanding how to handle change yourself, you and those around you will be better equipped to manage these transitions, big or small.

References

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Susan Helbig (Susan.Helbig@med.va.gov) is director of health information management at VA Puget Sound Health Care System and a lecturer at the University of Washington.

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