

Conscious Transformational Change in HIM Services

Save to myBoK

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The inevitability of HIM service restructuring is one of the fundamental tenets underlying AHIMA's Vision 2006. To thrive in an environment of dramatic healthcare industry restructuring and information technology explosion means that HIM services must change and we must learn to lead such change. This requires managers to learn about strategy development and change management.

Linda Ackerman Anderson describes four types of organizational change by their scope, motivation, and impact on the organization: a) Developmental change is driven by a goal of improving an existing system; b) Transitional change is undertaken to fix a perceived problem; c) Reactive transformation change is undertaken so that the organization might survive; and d) Conscious transformational change is undertaken so that the organization might survive and thrive. Many of our organizations are in the midst of transformational change—whether it is reactive or conscious can mean the difference between merely surviving or thriving.

The articles in this issue describe transformational change that is leader driven and undertaken to change the existing paradigm, to pursue a broad strategic framework. It is change that bumps up against culture and stretches the skill and will of the leaders. It is change that takes time and creativity to implement. It is change that certainly gets the attention of all staff members at a personal and emotional level and it demands creativity from everyone involved.

Change and Culture

Successful change management requires an understanding of the organization's culture(s) and a plan for working in its context.

Susan Clark and Patti Leri's very useful analysis of organizational cultures demonstrates what a real force or counterforce it can be in a change project. In fact, culture is one of the most powerful and stable forces operating in organizations, particularly in healthcare organizations with their well established and powerful subcultures. Any change agent ignores it at great peril.

Ironically, experts advise that it may not be wise to begin a change project by trying to change culture—understand it, certainly, but realize that it takes years to build a culture and it takes a good deal of time to change it. In fact, J.P. Kotter suggests that you should get other change going before you tackle changing the culture. Culture changes only after you have successfully altered peoples's actions, after new behavior produces some group benefit for a period of time, and after people see the connection between the new actions and performance improvement. E.H. Schein suggests that one way to alter culture in well-established organizations is to create parallel organizational development projects such as learning systems in which new assumptions are learned and tested. This strategy is attractive because it sidesteps the difficult task of convincing stakeholders to give up the familiar in favor of the untested new.

However it is approached, culture must be understood and accounted for in designing strategy and implementation plans so that it does not subvert or derail the effort. Clark and Leri offer survey tools that will be invaluable to those who are reorganizing HIM services.

The Importance of Relationships

Implementing change requires change agents adept at managing relationships and interactions as a way to achieve the goals.

Smith describes the planning and design process that she and other HIM managers at Carilion Health System undertook in a remarkably compressed period of time. I heard her description of the experiences of her team and their results last summer,

and I was struck by the excellent execution of a very complex challenge.

Smith and her team recognized the need to develop relationships, manage communication, and provide continual reinforcement. They also tracked their progress through periodic evaluations. Carilion's experiences mirror the steps recommended by Kotter and other change management experts.

Kotter outlines eight steps:

1. Establish a sense of urgency (the timeline handed down by Carilion's senior management left no doubt in this regard)
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate, communicate, communicate
5. Empower employees for broad-based action
6. Create short-term wins
7. Consolidate gains and produce more change
8. Anchor new approaches in the culture

Finding the Right Course

Managing change requires a vision that clarifies direction, motivates people to take action and helps coordinate these actions.

Smith began work by creating and refining the HIM mission and goals. James Braden presents a vision of the future of HIM as the context for the steps being taken today.

Fear and resistance to change come from lack of clarity and agreement on direction. An effective vision helps allay fears and resistance and provides a directional beacon as many other issues arise in complex transformational change. It will at least help the plan to get a hearing and get staff to consider new ways of doing things (to begin to contemplate "endings," as Clark points out). With clarity of direction, inappropriate projects can be identified and energy redirected. It also helps motivate action that is not necessarily in people's short-term self interests.

The word "vision" connotes something grand and mystical, but as Kotter says, "the direction that guides successful transformation is often simple and mundane, as in 'It's going to pour, let's go under that apple tree for shelter and eat some of the fruit for lunch.'" I sometimes worry that Vision 2006 sounds a bit like something from "Star Trek." In fact, its goals are very tangible and quite mundane (see "Setting Goals for Our Future," *Journal of AHIMA*, October 1996). Our contributing authors once again underscore that Vision 2006 is not a remote and vague effort. It is real and very much alive today.

References

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