

Different Path to Managing Change

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by Anne Zender, managing editor

Medical records director, research analyst, marketing expert—all these titles have applied, at some time, to Jean Corley, RRA. But her favorite role is as an "agent of change"—and she's assumed many titles in its pursuit.

Corley says that one of her professional goals has always been to make an impact on the quality of care delivered to patients. Throughout her career, she has found herself in a position of implementing change—from being involved in a department's move to a new location to planning a new system. Eventually, however, she realized that she was tired of trying to effect change "one facility at a time."

Corley chose another path—working for a vendor of information systems. She joined the 3M Company in 1984 and worked first as a sales representative, then as a sales manager, then as a marketing manager. Now, as manager of business planning for 3M Health Information Systems in Salt Lake City, UT, she works to support the company's strategic planning process—studying and analyzing healthcare trends to determine 3M's future direction. While her job may not resemble her past work in medical records departments, her HIM background serves her well. "My HIM experience has been crucial—it helps me understand what is happening and apply that to us as an information systems vendor," Corley says. "We ask, 'What are people doing, and what can we provide to support that?' It helps to understand not only what is necessary to document healthcare, but how to ensure that facilities operate smoothly."

Hands-on Learning Processes

Corley is well acquainted with the basics of documentation and healthcare delivery. An accredited HIM professional since 1970, she has been director of medical information services in several facilities and a research/systems analyst. She went back to school several times to expand her knowledge, obtaining both an MBA and a master's degree in public administration. When she decided to pursue a career path with a vendor, however, she began a process of educating herself about information systems. One way of forcing herself to learn quickly was to go back to school—not as a student, but as an instructor in a community college. This, she says, was a way to get quickly brought up to speed on information systems and computers. "It allowed me to know the jargon," she says. Once she had established a comfort level with the material, "when an opportunity to work for a vendor appeared, I could participate in the conversation," she says.

Once Corley had joined 3M, she faced another challenge—succeeding in information systems sales. To adapt to the role, she thought of herself as more of a consultant than a salesperson. This approach has proven successful over the years. Corley says she's gratified to know that she has helped her clients decide how change will take place. "When you see how smoothly a facility can implement an MPI or an interface between two disparate systems, it's rewarding to know that our concepts were able to help them do that."

Her vendor's perspective on information system installations has helped her understand how HIM professionals can participate more effectively in these projects. "The computer-based patient record is a big change for any institution," Corley says. "The institution must be willing to deal with the changes—in people management, in procedure management. HIM professionals have knowledge and experience that CIOs and CFOs need." She urges HIM professionals to "educate ourselves on regulations, keep up with the issues, and play politics a little."

But—she cautions—"remember that the real thing is the patient. You can't forget the patient." HIM professionals can act as patient advocates by honing their expertise on issues such as information access, privacy, and confidentiality. "Step up and show your strengths, and show how you can make that process move forward," Corley says.

Where Do You Want to Go?

Corley's advice to other HIM professionals contemplating a career change is simple. "Set a goal for yourself for what you want to do and figure out how to get into a position that will allow you to do it," she says. "Figure out how to build on skills that will be needed in the future and where you will be most comfortable working."

Like all HIM professionals, she faces the challenge of keeping current with the rapidly changing healthcare industry. "What with mergers and acquisitions between facilities and between vendors and trends in deliverables and changes in legislation and regulation, there's a lot to stay on top of," she says. Corley meets this challenge using old and new methods—from clipping and filing articles on pertinent topics to subscribing to an Internet news service that broadcasts personalized news to her computer.

For this change agent, pursuing her goal has meant taking some risks. It's a process, Corley reminds us, that never ends. "We should always question how things can be done better," she says.

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