

From Plan to Performance: Implementing Change

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by Anne Zender, managing editor

Healthcare restructuring is happening everywhere these days—and Barbara Siegel, ART, knows this firsthand. She has helped to implement a hospitalwide reorganization that has affected nearly all of the facility's 3000 employees.

Siegel, director of medical records at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, NJ, is also a project leader for a reorganization endeavor called the Patient Care Initiative. As a project leader, she is responsible for coordinating consulting services, facilitating meetings as a neutral party, and helping move projects along. She also helps collect information for quarterly reports, coordinates patient surveys, and manages budgets. All of this is in addition to her duties as one of two managers in her department, supervising 40 full-time employees.

Creating Change

Since coming to Valley Hospital, a 421-bed facility that is part of Valley Health System, in 1994, Siegel has been involved as a volunteer in planning and implementing changes as part of the reorganization. She has served as chair of a business administration committee and as a member of a human resources committee.

The human resources team evaluated policies and practices to ensure consistency, and it also was charged with whittling down the overwhelming number of job titles held by Valley Hospital employees. This resulted in the original 600 job descriptions and titles being simplified down to between 50 and 60, she says.

The business administration team that Siegel headed identified tasks and functions that could be moved from centralized departments to patient care areas. For the medical records department, that included transferring some functions to nursing units, such as assembling and copying records for transfers. At the same time, the department expanded its duties to include activities such as a tumor registry and ER and outpatient coding. Siegel also managed the admitting department for approximately two years. Eventually all registration was transferred to nursing units and outpatient areas, and the department closed in September 1997.

The restructuring, Siegel says, was "intended to reduce management and to move decision making to the staff level." The ultimate goal was to increase patient satisfaction while improving delivery of services. The process began more than three years ago and is still in progress today. It is, as Siegel confirms, a gradual process. "We've been told it takes three, five, or eight years to start to reap the benefits of this kind of reorganization," she says.

A byproduct of the process has been an increased emphasis on crosstraining and education. Considerable effort has gone into helping hospital employees deal with the changes in their workplace, such as educational sessions ranging from coping with change and dealing with conflict to being part of a team. The process, Siegel says, "really changes the concept of how the care teams work with each other."

Making Good Use of Skills

Being a part of the implementation of these changes has called for some adroit interpersonal maneuvering, as well as leadership skills and meeting facilitation skills, on Siegel's part. As she proceeded, she found she could draw on experience gained as president of the New York Health Information Management Association. "It gave me the opportunity to lead diverse groups, which gave me a broader perspective," she says.

Cooperating with members of patient care units and executive staff members has been valuable in affording her exposure to many points of view to which she wouldn't ordinarily have access. "Unless you are working on the clinical side, you don't

always understand the issues they're dealing with," she says. She finds, too, that other staff members come to her when they need a sounding board for their concerns.

For others who might try to effect change at their organizations, Siegel's advice is simple: communicate. At Valley Hospital, she says, the reorganization was prompted not because of financial problems but by a desire to improve services. "At first, employees didn't understand why we were doing this," she says. "You have to do communication after communication and keep repeating the message as often as possible until people really hear it."

She also advises, "Expect that it's going to be difficult." During periods of major change, she says, staff members may go through a process of denial. "They come out of it at different points," she says. Managers should realize that as employees adjust their attitudes, behaviors, and expectations, they may need different kinds of assistance. "You need to recognize when staff members need additional support and when they can provide leadership to others. You also have to recognize that some staff members will never want to change."

Maintaining the Proper Skill Level

To stay up to date on her profession, Siegel says, she makes a point of keeping up by reading magazines and journals. "It's important to keep up with reading, even if it's just skimming articles," she says. "This helps you understand what's going on in healthcare and how it will affect your part of the country." She also stresses the importance of networking.

Ultimately, however, one of the keys to her career success has been staying open to other opportunities. "A lot of managerial skills can be applied to other projects and departments," she says. "If opportunity knocks, it can lead you to bigger things." This willingness to step up to the plate was at work when she volunteered for the restructuring project, and it keeps her in the game today. "I volunteered for the first task force because I had an inkling the project would affect my department," she says, "and that it also would keep me challenged outside of my day-to-day activities."

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