Heading Up HIPAA Compliance

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by Harold Dahlstrand

Why do some organizations consistently thrive in an era of ever-changing politics, regulations, and increasingly scarce resources? The answer is leadership. Winning organizations have excellent leaders who know how to make smart decisions and implement them quickly and effectively. Those who are leading their staff to HIPAA implementation must possess these skills.

The person who has the responsibility of implementing, communicating, training, and bringing HIPAA into a healthcare setting needs to have the full support and buy-in of everyone in the organization—from the CEO down. This article offers suggestions for leading your organization to a successful implementation.

Work From the Top Down

To begin, you'll need the CEO's full commitment to HIPAA. If you already have it, your job is easier. If you don't, work within your organization's culture, structure, politics, and staff to best discern how to seek this support. The CEO must lead by example by being the HIPAA "champion," accepting the responsibility, and "talking up" the importance of HIPAA principles.

It is important to establish a **sense of urgency and importance about HIPAA** to fellow managers and employees. Transformations to new policies and procedures tend to fail when complacency levels are high. Without a sense of urgency, people won't give the essential extra effort. As an implementer of HIPAA, you must be aware that there will be people in the organization who will fight it or not understand its importance.

An Urgent Message

To create a sense of urgency, work through your HIPAA key players or committees to strategize, plan, implement, train, and communicate HIPAA's importance and ramifications. **Brainstorming** is an effective way of bringing a group together as it considers all the business and personal issues related to implementing HIPAA. Invite members to a brainstorming session, letting them know in advance what they will be discussing and its importance.

Encourage the group to **generate as many ideas and obstacles** as possible in your time frame. Record your discussions and decisions. End the meeting by clarifying any uncertainties about ideas generated. This brainstorming session will help you develop a mission and strategy for implementing HIPAA that is appropriate for your organization. This session and further meetings with the group will also give you, as implementation leader, contact people through whom you can communicate the benefits of HIPAA to each department. These employees can also help you monitor and control HIPAA implementation.

Taking the Lead

Consider the following points as you lead the HIPAA initiative in your organization:

- **Don't be afraid to expand your role** as leader. Be as prepared to take on roles of consultant, mentor, and coach, as you may be the main decision maker for your company for this project.
- **Be a consistent leader**. Exhibit your ability to handle the challenge with confidence. This will set a good example for the rest of the staff.
- **Encourage others to be leaders**. Getting colleagues involved will give them confidence and create a long-term team environment benefit.
- **Communicate the big picture** of HIPAA. If you want your team to work hard and be committed to your project, you have to keep them informed. It also gives everyone a sense of pride, helping staff members understand how their work

contributes to the overall, successful HIPAA implementation. Set up "town hall" meetings to inform employees from all departments about what is going on and answer any questions.

- **Delegate the work and empower others**. Delegate pieces of the project according to each team member's strengths and weaknesses.
- **Help your team set goals**. Clear objectives and deadlines help the team stay focused, busy, and motivated.
- **Recognize and anticipate problems**. Though it is impossible to anticipate all problems, if you stay current on your team's activities, you can be proactive and resolve situations before they escalate.
- If possible, **set up a reward system** for your team. Discuss this approach with your organization's leadership. However this is done, make sure your team knows the value your organization places on its efforts and contributions.
- Be a **mentor**. As a team leader, one of the greatest gifts you can give your team members is sharing your knowledge and experience.
- Make sure you **take the time to be a leader**. Be available even during busy times when work is piling up. Employees depend on your strength and guidance, especially when they're stressed out or faced with new projects such as this.

The more people know, understand, and are involved in major changes such as HIPAA implementation, the more smoothly the change will take place. It will take teamwork, commitment, empowerment, and a lot of communication to make sure HIPAAimplementation goes smoothly. It will take a dependable, skilled leader to meet that challenge.

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What Makes a Leader?

Leadership is a complex process that influences others toward cohesive and coherent outcomes. Here are some characteristics of a good leader:

- handles the roles, rules, and structure of organizational life, using power and authority appropriately
- holds others and his or herself accountable, working within the framework of policy and established procedures and making tough decisions
- exercises formal and informal power, influence, and authority without overwhelming coworkers
- adapts the style and intensity of his or her leadership to fit the situation
- possesses the people skills necessary to forge united, smooth-running, goal-oriented teams made up of people with disparate personalities, skills, and motivations
- listens attentively, sends clear signals, and conveys openness, friendliness, and cooperation
- determines direction, states a clear vision for employees to follow, and helps employees understand the role they play in attaining goals
- uses power, influence, vision, persuasion, and communication skills effectively
- commands a high level of respect, trust, motivation, and commitment from employees
- helps employees understand and support the organization's overall mission, goals, and objectives
- has dedication, compassion, and passion for his or her job

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