

Leading: What It Means in HIM

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By Genna Rollins

Times like these require a lot of leadership. That means risk-taking, passion, mentoring, and always striving, say HIM professionals.

The enormous change that healthcare is undergoing calls for professionals in all disciplines to step out of their routines and play an active role in shaping the future. Leadership happens at all levels, in all settings, and in all amounts. It shapes an industry, a profession, and individual careers—both those of the leaders and their colleagues.

Among the many challenges that HIM professionals are stepping up to address, two of the most pressing center on rapid changes in the field and an ever-expanding knowledge base.

“The amount of knowledge we need to have and the process of getting employees adequately trained and knowledgeable is so demanding,” says Sandra Nunn, MA, RHIA, CHP, enterprise content and information manager at Presbyterian Healthcare Services in Albuquerque, NM. “The old model of people remaining in the same job or doing the same thing for decades has gone away.”

Because it is so broad and deep, the HIM knowledge base has a distinct advantage in transforming society’s view of healthcare and in firmly establishing a more expansive role for the profession. “In order to convince the public that EHRs are good, we have to assure them that records are safe and secure in a day and age when breaches are reported in the press daily,” notes Nancy Davis, MS, RHIA, director of privacy and security officer at Ministry Health Care in Milwaukee, WI, and chair of AHIMA’s 2009 Professional Ethics Committee.

However, that HIM is well qualified to address this challenge is not so apparent to colleagues in healthcare. “Because of our role in compliance with the legal medical record and privacy laws, we’re thought of as the people who say ‘no,’” observes Keith Olenik, MA, RHIA, CHP, principal of Olenik Consulting Group in Kansas City, MO, visiting professor of HIM at the University of Cincinnati, and chair of the AHIMA Foundation. “We have to position ourselves as leaders in a changing environment so that we are thought of as authorities in an electronic world and as solutions providers.”

Taking on Challenges

For Olenik, the process of being in a position to influence the professional standing of HIM began decades ago when he took on that first task that seemed outside the box of his background and training. “I was working in a large nursing home and we were opening a rehabilitation center,” he recalls. “I did research on the laws and regulations surrounding this and looked at it like a research project in school. In doing so, I demonstrated an ability that was beyond my education and experience up to that point.”

That circumstance led him to further opportunities that broadened his perspective of healthcare and to still other positions with varying responsibilities, culminating with the establishment of his own firm, where he consults with organizations from across the industry.

A theme Olenik has observed throughout his own career and in those of colleagues is the importance of “being able to articulate and back up why HIM is a critical player in every organization,” he says. “I hear from AHIMA members all the time that they don’t have a place at the table and that they’re not considered authorities in the electronic world.”

In Olenik’s career the way around that obstacle always has been to stretch himself by accepting new opportunities, building his self-confidence, and learning from each experience. “I’ve been able to transfer the good and bad things I’ve observed in

others and over time become more confident in my leadership,” he explains.

Although there are inherent leaders with “a more natural ability to communicate with people,” leadership for most people “is something you have to try out,” according to Olenik. The capacity for leadership builds throughout one’s career, he contends. “You become conscious of how you present yourself, apply your skills, understand situations, and figure out the right communication style to engage people and bring them along. Over time that experience is additive.”

Taking Risks

Looking back on her career, Mervat Abdelhak, PhD, RHIA, FAHIMA, sees herself pushing the envelope time and again, being willing to take risks, and thinking beyond the here-and-now to envision new frontiers. Considerable pluck and hard work have been part of the formula, too.

Today Abdelhak is department chair and professor of HIM at the University of Pittsburgh. But in the early 1970s, she was a young immigrant from Cairo, Egypt, embarking on her version of the American dream.

“I was willing to take a risk and come to the US for my freedom, to work hard and achieve goals, and not follow the typical expectations of my native culture,” she recalls. Initial plans to go to medical school were put on permanent hiatus after she tested the waters in the then-fledgling HIM program. Even in the 1970s she saw how important technology would be to HIM and pursued both master’s and doctoral degrees in information technology.

Asked to stay on as a faculty member, Abdelhak assumed greater responsibilities in the department over the years and made a commitment to keep on the latest pulse of the industry.

“Nothing has stayed the same,” she observes. “We’re always looking for how to improve, always looking ahead. Our feeling is that with passion we’ll get there.” Experimentation also has been a hallmark of her leadership. “We’re willing to take risks and try things. Not everything works out, but we’ve found that if you do things in increments you can adapt and adjust as needed,” she says.

As Abdelhak looks ahead to challenges in the field, she, like Olenik, sees a need for HIM professionals to earn respect from colleagues in other disciplines. “Our practitioners are really knowledgeable about what needs to be done, but getting engaged in important projects and recognized for their value is a big obstacle,” she explains. “Once they’re involved, they’re seen as valuable.” Passion, motivation, and vision are the crucial aspects of leadership that have guided her through decades of service to the profession.

Risk-taking also has been a defining element of Nunn’s career and her development as a leader in HIM. Nunn started her professional life as a teacher, but she made the leap to HIM in her late 20s. Thanks to guidance from a mentor with a prescient view of the role information technology one day would have in health information, she pursued a master’s in the field.

Nunn subsequently worked in information systems for years, delving into a wide range of organizations and varying responsibilities, always with the idea of taking on new challenges and learning more. Her risk-taking extended to being self-employed as a consultant and accepting new positions in emerging areas of information systems and HIM.

Nunn carried her experience into the field of enterprise-wide content management, an emerging practice in healthcare, and recently has been promoted to IT business partner, a role in which she represents IT to the business.

Because of the mentoring she has received throughout her career, Nunn takes special pride in supporting younger colleagues. “Someone asked me recently to go to lunch and give her advice about her career, and I was so humbled and honored that she asked,” Nunn says. “I’ll do anything to help young, talented women move forward.”

Teaching also holds a special place in her heart. After class one evening a couple of students thanked her for the presentation she had just made. “When I got home, I told my husband, I’m hardly paid anything to teach but I feel like I make a million dollars doing it!”

In assessing the qualities of leaders she has admired and tried to emulate, Nunn believes it is particularly important to encourage colleagues “not to do everything the way it’s already been done, but to inspire them to be creative innovators,” she says.

Tools for Technical Leadership

In addition to softer skills, today’s HIM leaders require technical leadership skills to help their organizations integrate health IT. AHIMA leadership models help HIM professionals advance technical HIM concepts and precepts in data standards, legal EHR, and ICD-10-CM/PCS. The free models are presented as a matrix of goals, characteristics, sample activities, and learning resources. See www.ahima.org/infocenter/practice_tools.asp. [web site no longer available]

Professional Connections

Three decades of involvement in AHIMA and four component state associations have given David Westlake, MA, RHIA, CHP, CHC, a unique perspective on issues of importance to the field and essential qualities of leadership.

Westlake is 2009 president of the Wyoming HIM Association. His work at WyHIMA and in a variety of committees and governance positions in the Idaho, Alaska, and Montana HIM associations also have opened career doors and helped him make connections that had practical consequences in his work life. “I’ve been able to do a lot of networking so that I didn’t feel I was in a stand-alone situation,” he recalls. “I was able to choose the most knowledgeable people to consult with, and because they know who you are they’re willing to work with you.”

Westlake’s leadership at the state HIM association level boosted his career as well. Knowledge and experience gained through leading these groups translated into career opportunities he otherwise might not have had.

“Because AHIMA is always pushing to the forefront, I was able to leverage my HIM background into an acting CEO position,” Westlake explains. “There was confidence in my capabilities and leadership, and I used my leadership skills to be at the top of my profession.”

Westlake is concerned that HIM professionals increasingly are finding it difficult to actively participate in state associations, even though doing so offers the chance to round out their experiences and develop leadership skills.

“Our biggest challenge is keeping everyone motivated and involved,” he says. “Time is a big issue today, and because of economic challenges, not everyone has support from their employers.” Westlake hopes to build bench strength in the various state HIM associations as they struggle to balance financial and membership concerns with the desire to provide top-quality education and networking opportunities.

Like Westlake, participation in AHIMA and state associations have been crucial in keeping Davis in the loop on cutting-edge issues, and at times, still actively engaged in major challenges in the field, even when she lived in relatively remote locations.

In addition, Davis has benefited throughout her career from the concerned interest of other professionals, an aspect of leadership that she has emulated. “I would not have been in this field or advanced without the mentorship of some very strong women. Hopefully I’ve done the same for others. I view it as an obligation, but not as a burden, because other people stepped up for me,” she says.

Davis also has been willing to step up to the plate in taking on HIM students and newly minted graduates. “I sympathize because organizations are really stressed right now, but in my experience, it keeps departments sharp, abreast of new things, and the students are a potential labor source, so the positives outweigh the negatives,” she contends.

Over the years, Davis has learned that expressing opinions and relaying experiences is part of the leadership picture, too. “The ability to promote yourself and others who work for you and not to be so hidden is important so that your colleagues are aware of what’s happening,” she explains.

Critical Thinking, Motivation, and Support

Coding is the backbone of Linda Schwab's career, but it also has been the prism through which she has gained a deeper understanding of patient care and developed critical thinking skills. These skills in turn have cultivated her leadership credentials.

Schwab, RHIT, CCS, is director of coding and clinical documentation management for Integrated Revenue Management in Carlsbad, CA. "In the early days of my career I was taken out of HIM and reported to finance. I did concurrent coding on the units, where I got to ask doctors questions and had great clinical exposure. That, along with the data experience I had, gave me a great foundation," she recalls. "It was also where I learned how important it was to have state HIM associations, because there was no one else I could go to with coding questions."

Those experiences morphed into coding and data management positions, culminating with her current responsibilities, which include training coders to look for root causes and trends that identify revenue and compliance opportunities.

Her early experiences discussing charts with physicians developed a habit that served her well as her career advanced. "I think it's important to get involvement from all sides and look at issues from the perspective of others instead of staying only in the HIM world with blinders on," Schwab contends. "Look at what patient accounting needs, for example, and you can appreciate why they may have been impatient at times. As we begin to understand their point of view, we can all get on the same page."

Like Davis, Schwab also has made a point of leading by example, even when it involved difficult decisions like hiring newly minted coders without work experience. "When you see people who are so motivated and dedicated, you have to help them get a start because someone gave you a start," she says.

Lorraine Fernandes, RHIA, shares Schwab's philosophy about considering the perspective of non-HIM colleagues.

"Think about the opposite side of the equation. If I'm a vendor, I try to think of the customer. If I'm the provider, I think of the patient," she explains. "We all provide a service and have knowledge, but that is a way to not get so entwined in our current responsibilities that we can't think about or articulate the bigger picture."

Fernandes is vice president and industry ambassador for Initiate Systems in Chicago. To Fernandes, finding time to think of the future and bringing others into that vision is an essential leadership responsibility.

"You have to be able to motivate and excite people so they want a broader knowledge and so that you can get them involved in coming up with creative ideas that you may not have thought of," she says.

Like her other HIM colleagues, Fernandes also is bullish on giving her time to cultivate the next generation of HIM professionals. Fernandes started as a unit secretary and benefitted from the early guidance and support of a generous mentor. "She picked up on my inquisitiveness and inspired me to continue my education," she recalls.

Coaching, she learned, does not require vast amounts of time to be helpful. "When I was a ward clerk I looked forward to five-minute conversations I had with physicians. It really advanced my clinical knowledge, and I was so appreciative that they took the time."

As Fernandes' career advanced, the guidance from open-minded supervisors shaped her views of good leadership. "Nobody boxed me into a specific role. I was given the ability to explore and expand professionally. I think supportive leadership like that is critical," she says.

In these fast-changing times, then, leading does involve stepping ahead to take on new challenges, but it just as importantly is about a leadership cultivated by example that collaborates and looks for the best in others.

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