

Learning to Lead Change: For Managers, Boosting Leadership Skills Helps Smooth IT Implementations

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by Chris Dimick

Any change brings with it uncertainty, doubt, and fear of the unknown.

These are strong emotions, and it takes strong-willed and confident leaders to combat them. An organization is only as good as its leaders—a statement especially true in the fast-changing world of healthcare.

Susan Leussler, RHIA, saw major change approaching at her hospital and knew she had to shore up her ability to lead the HIM staff through the emotional storm.

The manager of HIM at Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital in St. Peters, MO, Leussler today faces the large responsibility of helping her organization implement an electronic health record (EHR). Foreseeing the magnitude of the task, Leussler decided it was important to attend leadership training in order to help ease the implementation's impact on herself and her HIM department.

"I wanted to learn better ways to handle change for my employees. I knew that moving from a paper-based record to an electronic record would be challenging," Leussler says. "I felt I needed some specific training in change management leadership, but also in change process."

Leussler attended an AHIMA-sponsored, two-day program called Renaissance for the 21st Century: Leading the Change to EHR, a seminar focused on helping HIM professionals become better leaders in their organizations. Leussler says she learned leadership techniques that could be directly applied during her facility's EHR implementation.

Learning to Plan for Change

At Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital, several systems currently cold-feed electronic records into a data repository. Staff can view transcription, labs, radiology, cardio-respiratory, physical therapy, nursing, and other records through this system, Leussler says. Post-discharge scanning leading to a fully integrated electronic records system is on the horizon. The hospital has begun discussions relating to the EHR implementation and is working on developing a charter.

People can talk all they want about change, but when a person's job actually becomes different, that is when it takes a good leader to help staff adjust. With 23 full-time employees in her department, Leussler knew she had to have a plan in place to help make the implementation a success. Leadership training helped formulate that plan.

Leussler learned several techniques that will ease her department's post-discharge scanning and electronic transition. Different people respond to change in various ways, she says, and in order for a group to accept change, a leader must first focus efforts on key members. "You need to work with your innovators in the department, and once they are on board, they can be of assistance in the entire department's transition," she says.

Leussler now thinks about change as comprised of two equally important elements—physical and emotional impact. "The physical part of change is where you change the actual work process," she notes. "But the emotional part of change is when people must integrate the change within their work ideas." That insight helps Leussler understand staff fears a little more and be able to lead more effectively, she says.

HIM staffers are not the only ones who undergo stress during an EHR implementation. Managers also see their roles transition, and they must learn to accept the change.

Whether it is learning how to better communicate with others outside the HIM office or working with unsure HIM employees, Leussler recommends leadership training to other HIM professionals facing an EHR implementation. Having a management plan makes the view on change a lot sunnier, she says.

“You can always see it as positive, going from paper to electronic, but then when you are in the middle of change, it is different,” Leussler says. “[Leadership training] gives you that added boost to get through that. It gives you more confidence in the transition.”

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