

# Navigating a Successful Business Turnaround

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*by Richard Armstrong, RHIA, and Carol Ann Quinsey, RHIA, CHPS*

Have you ever walked into a job knowing it was in your hands to turn back a tide of red ink and put the business back on its feet? If you have been in this situation, you know it can be overwhelming. However, with the artful application of basic change-management processes and skills, you can achieve a successful business turnaround.

## Assess the Situation

The first item on the agenda must be a thorough assessment of the current situation. Just what are the numbers? How many days does it take for accounts receivable to process a bill? How long has there been a downward trend? What is the state of staff morale? Are physicians and other leadership partners ready to roll up their sleeves and work with you? Without an assessment in hand, it is impossible to know how to prioritize steps to correct the problem.

An initial assessment should include a review of relevant policies and procedures, performance standards, training, references and tools available to staff, the physical setup (lighting, space, technology), and communication processes and tools. In addition, it is imperative to evaluate the organizational structure, supervisory and staff skills, training, and morale. An assessment of executive leadership's commitment to support the changes required to make improvements in the bottom line is critically important. This can be a valuable opportunity to assert your own leadership by providing a vision of how the operation should look with the improvements you propose to implement. Developing a strategic plan and including others in the process is also an excellent way to convey your vision.

## Start with the Staff

With the baseline assessment in hand, a decision can be made as to the scope of the change that will be required. The next step is to determine how best to begin the improvement process. Involving staff is vital in putting together the plan. Staff members are the critical factor in the culture change required, and they are the knowledge workers whose work lives will be changed the most.

Develop the work force to be an asset. Identify informal leaders among the staff and give them a strong role in the change processes. Let them help you make changes that will last. They often have powerful influence among the work force and can play crucial roles in achieving goals. Informal leaders may also be candidates for supervisory roles with mentoring and training.

Hold regular meetings that allow team members to see where their work fits into the organization. They need to share the vision of a future that acknowledges the importance of their work. Make staff meetings a place where employees can identify what is good and what should change. Let staff share what works, what does not work, and suggest ways to improve the processes they use.

Throw away perceived barriers for the moment. Ask staff to help visualize how work would flow in a perfect situation. Don't ask them to settle for less than perfection until you have jointly mapped an ideal work flow for the process. Then compare the ideal work flow with the current work flow. Validate the barriers; are they real or perceived? As processes are undergoing change, always work toward the closest match to the ideal work flow. At this point you should be experiencing real gains in staff confidence. Use team meetings to monitor results of changes and celebrate accomplishments. This helps instill pride in the staff and encourages them to make continuing improvements.

Update policies, procedures, tools (e.g., computers, software, cheat sheets, and references) where necessary. Staff cannot be expected to do their job with insufficient training and tools, and they may lose interest in trying as time goes by.

As changes are made, implement monitoring tools, preferably managed and reviewed by staff. Peer review has a powerful influence on everyone. There is nothing more inspiring than graphing visual evidence that shows improvement. This will provide another boost in morale. Graphs can plot the number of days in accounts receivable, the number of charts to be coded, accounts requiring rebilling, or graphs can utilize tools that let staff see at a glance whether daily fluctuations in numbers are significant. Once staff are trained and have taken ownership in the ongoing use of such tools, they can be maintained without a significant investment of time.

## Celebrate!

Always celebrate improvements and milestones and continue to communicate, communicate, communicate. It is very easy to surpass the original goal and forget to celebrate. Recognizing that goals have been achieved is crucial and should not be overlooked.

So don't hesitate to take that tough challenge. It can be done. By going back to basics you can make a huge difference to an organization.

**Richard Armstrong** ([armstrrr@empirehealth.org](mailto:armstrrr@empirehealth.org)) is a director of physician practice management for Empire Health Services. **Carol Ann Quinsey** ([carol.quinsey@ahima.org](mailto:carol.quinsey@ahima.org)) is an HIM practice manager at AHIMA.

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