

Transition Management: Striking a Balance

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by Susan Helbig, MA, RHIA

Life in today's healthcare organizations is challenging for everyone involved—patients, providers, third-party payers, vendors, and HIM professionals. As HIM professionals, we are constantly in a state of transition in some area of our practice, which can be both challenging and rewarding.

Change and transition can be viewed as two different concepts. Change is an external event, happening to us or to our department or work group. Transition is an internal passage from one state to another that occurs within us or within our department or work group. We must deal with both external changes and internal transitions in order to be successful in today's environment. This article discusses how to manage transitions and avoid being overwhelmed by change.

Recognizing Change

It is often tempting to dwell on the past and on how we successfully met (or avoided) previous challenges. Even the way we learn about new issues has evolved. Previously, we may have gone to traditional classes to learn. Now we listen to audio seminars or use Web-based learning.

Change involves moving from a well-known, comfortable way of doing something to a new, unfamiliar way. Transition is the relationship among all the parts that are influencing or being influenced by the external change. Transition includes noticing how we deal with change and how we change personally.

If we have a frank discussion with colleagues or others, we may find that we have emotional responses to various aspects of the external changes or internal transitions involved. These responses can include anger, frustration, depression, excitement, passion, and impatience. Striking a balance between excitement and frustration about a specific change can help smooth the transition process.

Where You Are Now . . .

The first step in managing transition is evaluating what is presently going on around you. The following questions will be helpful in determining this:

- What processes or changes are in motion?
- Are any of these change processes a problem?
- How can you affect the change process to fix the problem?
- What is your emotional relationship to these changes?

. . .and Where You Are Going

It is much easier to accept change if you identify the direction in which it is going and understand why the change is necessary. In what direction is your organization headed? Does your HIM department support your organization's mission and vision? Do you personally and passionately support your organization's and department's mission and vision?

It is more productive to choose to be a part of a change rather than choose to resist it. Change requires personal energy, but resistance requires as much if not more of your energy. If you are part of the change, you have the possibility of influencing or controlling at least some of the changes that will occur. For example, if you accept the fact that your organization is implementing an electronic health record, you are in a better position to identify the needed workflow changes to support such a technology. Create a mental map of potential changes. Think about the possibilities and where that map could lead you.

Educate Yourself

Become an expert on the theory and practice of change itself. Investigate books on change theory. Find out about the changes occurring around you. Read professional publications and books, ask questions of the leaders in your organization, and talk with your colleagues throughout the organization and the community in which you work. Find out what's possible and start talking about it.

When you become involved in the future, it may not seem so overwhelming. Stay current with general changes in the healthcare environment and emerging technology, especially HIM-specific technology. Spend time with colleagues talking about what you see as the immediate and long-range HIM future. Prepare yourself conceptually for current and emerging changes in your professional life.

Manage Your Own Transition

It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by the speed at which healthcare and HIM are traveling. Every change in technology can lead to minor and major changes to work processes. A collection of changes can drastically transform skills, knowledge, and the amount of staffing necessary for traditional job tasks. Beware of becoming overwhelmed. Develop strategies to help you manage your own inner transition.

Decide what the most important goals are for you and your organization. What are your most important goals right now? Realize you have a finite amount of time and energy for the job. Write down your values. Organize them in a hierarchy and keep them in front of you. Use your planning and time management skills. If you don't have these skills, aim to devote some time to learning them.

It is also important to confront and deal with your feelings. Pay attention to what is happening in the big picture and internally and know that part of being in balance is to accept that change and transition are the nature of contemporary HIM practice. u

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Article citation:

Helbig, Susan. "Transition Management: Striking a Balance." *Journal of AHIMA* 74, no.4 (April 2003): 58-59.
