Health Care Leaders Flex Work Styles to Team Members' Needs

October 5, 2011

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With the health care industry facing rising costs, a lingering recessionary climate and major shifts in regulation, effective leadership has never been more important. However, most clinical training doesn't explicitly teach leadership competencies — one of the most important of which is the ability to communicate and connect with team members in meaningful and motivating ways.

Work-style flexibility is also important for leaders. "Many health care professionals have earned leadership positions by being excellent individual clinicians and contributors," said Sally Durgan, associate director of leadership at the Center for the Health Professions at the University of California, San Francisco. "However, successful leaders do more work through others, who may vary greatly in personality and preferences."

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"Self-awareness is key to developing social and emotional intelligence," said George Sweazey, president of GES Professional Development Inc. and coach and faculty member for several of the center's leadership programs. "Leaders who are cognizant of their style can hone behaviors that increase social flexibility."

To expand self-awareness, the center, which produces research and delivers health care system leadership programs, uses the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) model, a theory of interpersonal behavior developed by social psychologist Will Schutz. The model identifies three areas of interpersonal needs:
• Inclusion is about individuals in relation to groups and indicates how much individuals include others in their lives and how much attention, contact and recognition they want from others.
• Control is about both one-to-one relationships and individual behavior as part of a group and indicates how much influence and responsibility individuals want and how much they want others to lead and influence them.
• Affection is about the need to establish comfortable one-to-one relationships and indicates how close and warm individuals are with others and how close and warm they want others to be with them.

The model explores behavior in terms of wanted and expressed needs within these three categories. For example, people with high wanted needs for inclusion desire to be included in the activities around them, while someone with low wanted needs for inclusion isn't particularly concerned with the invitation. Expressed needs are outward behaviors. People with high expressed need for inclusion, for example, tend to include everyone in what they're doing, while someone with low expressed inclusion needs likely doesn't give much thought to including others.

Sweazey said in his experience, wanted needs directly relate to job satisfaction, while expressed needs most often relate to job effectiveness. For leaders, expressed needs become acutely important because they're almost completely relying on others to advance their initiatives. The challenge, therefore, involves flexing or adapting their own expressed behaviors to team members' needs.

The first step involves taking the leaders through several assessments, including the FIRO behavior tool, which identifies and measures their wanted and expressed needs. Durgan said this helps leaders recognize how they are inclined to behave when they aren't consciously thinking about what they're doing. Equipped with this self-awareness, leaders can define tactics to alter their interactions according to team members' needs and do what is effective instead of what comes naturally.

Brett Penfil, director of coaching at the center, worked with a participant who was interested in an executive director role, yet showed low expressed and high wanted control needs, preferring others take control and provide structure. After Penfil worked with her, she recognized that she needed to provide structure for her organization to fulfill her role successfully, and develop new skills to make this happen.

Sweazey said he also helps leaders hone behaviors that are within their comfort zone, yet require them to stretch. For example, leaders might have extremely low expressed need for inclusion, manifest by a lack of personal connections and, thus, a limited capacity to work through others. To connect meaningfully in a way that fits within their natural range of behavior, they might employ conversational icebreakers or arrive at meetings 10 minutes early to build relationships.