

The Executive's Role in Team-Based Improvement

Clint Maun, CSP

Today's healthcare organizations face multiple issues related to such areas as finding and keeping staff, improving customer service, and developing a higher level of customer base occupancy or census. Attacking those particular problems to create sustained ongoing measurable improvement requires a team approach—one with a plan. An essential component of the plan is the executive's role in such a team-based improvement initiative.

The executive should never underestimate his or her organizational impact. Keep in mind that "senior leaders (do indeed) have tremendous impact." ("Is Your Leadership Getting Through?") The person in charge of the organization, the CEO or COO, needs to be the person who guides and supports the team. "The most successful teams have strong upper management support... Lack of [such] management support is the number one cause of team failure." (Harrington-Mackin)

Supporting the team means simply that - offering support and guidance. It does not mean becoming intimately involved in the sub-team activities or getting mired in the day-to-day minutia that accompanies a team-based improvement initiative. The executive must provide overall spiritual guidance, if you will, or facilitation for the effort. This is the person who makes sure the meetings happen, that clearly defined roles and responsibilities are assigned, and that purposeful outcomes occur. Public relations issues, meeting minutes, logistics, binders or manuals, coffee and rolls, outcome documents, publications, and scorecards must be left to team members.

Leading the charge up the hill does not mean the executive is the only one that will take up a sword for the cause, the only one who will go down in battle. The leader needs to command the troops who will feed all the horses, load all the cannons, make sure there's enough food for the troops, row the boats across the water, and set up all the meetings and strategy conversations before the next battle. "The success of any improvement strategy is tied to the extent that leadership is aligned" with the strategy and its proper implementation" by the team. ("Turning Management Sympathy into Visible Support")

The executive also should be the celebration expert for successes, both large and small. His or her involvement as a guiding force and cheerleader is crucial. The leadership needs to set an unmistakable tone that says, "We're going to do a great job and fix this problem. And nothing's going to stand in our way."

Defining the executive's role in strategy, cheerleading, governance, and overall outcome is of vital importance to success. Being tied up in the daily minute running of the team and its tasks is not. The key people on the team make the initiative work. Executive support must be "demonstrated by the CEO's commitment to the team process and expressed confidence that success is achievable." (Harrington-Mackin)

Works Cited

Harrington-Mackin, Deborah, The Team Building Took Kit. New York: American Management Association. 1994.

"Is Your Leadership Getting Through." Behavioral Science Technology, Inc Perspectives in Behavioral Performance Improvement, September 2002. February 2004.

"Turning Management Sympathy into Visible Support." Behavioral Science Technology, Inc Behavior-Based Business Solutions from BST, Inc., December 2002. February 2004.