



Contrarian Edge

Hospital Knights to the Rescue

A recent opportunity put me in front of a health system audience of 100 managers selected for their smarts and attitude. Their mission was to assess whether or not the organization should undertake major systemic renewal.

A small feature of the change model called for renaming occupations. Employees would be called “associates” or “colleagues,” and those leading change would be called “commandos.” One physician objected, saying it ought to be enough to be called doctors and nurses—his legitimate point being that window dressing the change effort could be counterproductive.

But there’s another way to look at it: sending signals of changed roles, power, and relationships helps redefine expectations. Similar to Six Sigma’s black belt practitioners, at one level it’s only semantics, but at another it communicates a heightened skill and awakens interest.

The reason for renewal in organizations is that they underperform. Layer on layer of past decisions and ways of doing things mires down good performers, delays action, and ultimately kills motivation. Managers become prisoners of the status quo—one leader said getting a decision made at his hospital was like trying to swim in peanut butter.

Evidence shows that about 85% of change initiatives fail or have only marginal success. Most often, the reason is too-soft leadership and a mushy management climate. Managerial malaise is a plague in healthcare and a predictable precursor to organization failure. To succeed at removing management dullness,

leaders have to arrive at a point where they clearly see the need for toughness.

Years ago, Joe Batten wrote the classic book *Tough Minded Management* (Amacom, 1984). Its message wasn’t about being hard on people but about the need to cut through confusion, establish standards, be effective, and resolve the hard-nut problems.

Healthcare is afflicted with the too-nice boss, a group that seems to be rapidly growing. Although they talk about relationships and their embrace of participative management, it’s a guise. They won’t take charge, use their power on behalf of their people, or give them an honest accounting of how they are doing for fear of offending them. They won’t make the tough decisions. They send out a survey and form another committee producing yet another go-nowhere report. Endless activity, little results, and ultimately an abdication of responsibility.

This problem of non-forceful leadership occurs everywhere. In management, it’s the difference between playing hardball and softball. Are your organization’s managers pursuing their objectives with single-minded focus, going for competitive advantage, setting the pace of innovation, and testing the edges of the possible? Are they playing to win or just going through the softball motions? These managers play to play, and although they may not end up out-and-out losers, they certainly don’t win.

What’s it like to manage in your shop? Is it a high-performance organization with an on-fire culture or just another sloppily run place? Evidence suggests that excellence is often a stranger in healthcare environments, with a lot of settling for getting-by.

Samuel Johnson said, “Nothing will ever be accomplished if all possible objections must first be overcome.” I don’t think I can satisfactorily answer the objections that some have to commando thinking in healthcare. But history suggests that we might be on to something important.

In 600 AD, a monastic order of Hospitallers was established to build hospitals and care for the poor. During the Crusades in 1089, to earlier monastic vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, they added a fourth, which bound them to protect pilgrims and fight the enemy. Hospitallers became Knights Hospitaller. New times called for a new response.

This idea of powering up leaders to make change isn’t new. The Samurai were change agents that moved Japan from feudalism to the modern age; the highest order was the Bushido, warriors of highest principle. Similarly, historians Will and Ariel Durant noted that it wasn’t the Caesars but the Centurions who built the Roman Empire.

Are you a commando, a management marine, a reformer centurion, or a Bushido Samurai? Are you a Hospital Knight, ready to do what it takes to protect patients and fight illness and death? If you are, things will change. If not, what you see around you is as good as it’s going to get.

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