

Physicians as Models of Leadership

By Jeff Cowart

As physician practices work to meet the challenge of the mandated transition from fee-for-service to fee-for-value and population health management, the key factor in success is the ability to manage change.

Equally important is the ability of the practice leaders to articulate a vision, a direction and provide the inspiration for other physicians, clinical staff, and administrative staff to weather the process of change. The truth is, even when change is good, any change in a dynamic organization – and even personally – is generally disruptive.

No leader is more important in the practice setting than the physician. They command a natural respect by virtue of the societal position they hold as healers. Intuitively, others recognize that physicians process information along a logical chain to reach a conclusion, or diagnosis. In effect, the physician holds a natural position of leadership. Accordingly, the physician in has great power and presence to model the expected behaviors for everyone in the practice, from bedside manner with patients to embracing necessary change.

In today's healthcare environment, the continuing roll of change within the practice, some desired and some not, is formidable. From the demands of electronic medical records to the cascade of regulatory rules, the opportunity for disruption in the daily routines of the practice is significant. How that change is met and handled affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the work place and the perception of quality of care among the patients.

The physician has a unique opportunity, by his or her actions, to lead by example in this type of setting. Where there is chaos in the practice, we might expect to find a flustered and disorganized physician who is the *de facto* leader in the culture of complaint and who blames everyone within the sight line for the conditions. Where there is a resolve to work through issues with logic and focus, and create collaborative solutions with the practice management team, we might expect to find a physician who contributes realistic ideas and maintains a steady hand of service, even in the midst of unwanted change.

The key here is for the physician to better understand and own the role he or she plays in the nature and culture of the overall practice. People follow the leader, even if the leader does not want to lead. The physician is the natural leader within the practice, and plays a large role in setting the tone and conduct within the environment.

Jeff Cowart is president of MD/Advocates, a medical practice positioning and business development consulting company, and a message and presentation coach for corporate executives. Contact him at: jcowart@mdadvocates.com

