Leading in Times of Turmoil: Adaptation When There Are No Easy Answers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Adapting to change is the hallmark of survival.
- We can’t predict accurately what is around the corner in 2010 and beyond, but we know it will be very different than 2009 and the pace of change will be greatly accelerated.
- Successful leaders balance the tension between optimism and realism in healthy ways that create the motivation among their people to mobilize and produce productive solutions.
- The successful leader will help staff prepare for several possible scenarios and will equip them with possibilities for the future.
- Adaptive leadership is a viable model to carry us into the future.

If health care were predictable, there would be no need for leaders. People can manage themselves if given the right tools in a static situation. Leaders are needed to help organizations work through new challenges, changes, and situations where the answers aren’t obvious. As we look toward the future and the uncertainty that confronts us, there will be an incredible need for leadership to help people adapt to a reality that has not been seen before. The possibility or non-possibility of health care reform will challenge everything we ever knew about health care. The financial markets will be different and the challenges to the health care system will be enormous. We know our lives will be nothing but unpredictable and challenging in the world of health care in front of us. There will be no turning back to what we thought was normal. Instead, the new normal will be much faster paced, more challenging economically, and new models will be proposed and implemented.

It would be wonderful to say that there is great job security for leaders in the new normal because of the chaos and uncertainty, but that would not be true. Leaders who survive will be the ones who can help their unit/division/site and system adapt to the new normal. Leaders who fail will see the changes as nothing more than a variation on the past and treat the new challenges with solutions from the past. Adapting rapidly will be the measure of success for the leader in the turbulent times ahead. Heifetz has been writing about the adaptive model of leadership. This model fits very well for the challenges that leaders in nursing and health care will face in the coming months.

The Adaptive Leadership Model for Turbulent Times

Heifetz and his colleagues have been studying leadership for many years and developed the model of adaptive leadership that was described in three main publications: Leadership Without Easy Answers (Heifetz, 1994); Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002); and The Practice of Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009a) as well many articles in journals.

Heifetz (1994) describes leadership as the activity that fosters adaptive work. While that seems like a simple definition, he goes on to say that leaders must engage people to face the challenge of adjusting their values, changing their perspectives, and developing new behaviors and habits. This is no small challenge. Furthermore, Heifetz notes that it is the people who must find the solutions. The leader helps the people to find the solutions to address the problems. The charismatic leader who influences people to follow his vision does not fit in Heifetz’s model. He believes the leader conceptualizes the problem for the people and then puts pressure on the people to solve the problem.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) write that adaptive leaders are willing and able to confront and disturb people and to challenge what beliefs and behaviors people hold without questioning. Every day we have the opportunity for leadership but often shy away because of the difficulty of confronting alternate views that are not functional anymore. However, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) note that leadership is dangerous because when you confront people with alternate views and challenges for the future, they can perceive the future as full of loss, not possibilities. The concept of managing from the balcony where you can see a bigger view while simultaneously operating on the dance floor of operations can help the leader stay relevant in the middle of change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). This act of stepping out of the immediate action to analyze what is really going on and to get a clearer view of the big picture is championed by Heifetz as an important survival tactic. Johnson (1992) coined the term “polarity man-
agement” to note that leaders must hold opposite and different challenges simultaneously to be effective.

Finally Heifetz et al. (2009a) add that adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. They note that leaders must excel at the best practices of today and at the same time develop the next practices that will ensure the viability of the organization in the future. Adaptive leaders seize the moment and utilize the turbulence to close down dysfunctional practices, reshape the organization, and redefine the work that people do.

Adaptive Leadership and Health Care in 2010 and Beyond

It’s safe to say that health care will not be the same in 2010 if the scenario of health care reform does or does not happen. Without reform, the health care industry will continue on the path of accelerated costs, quality challenges, and reduced revenue. With health care reform, an entirely new world of challenges will confront us. The need to adapt to accelerated change will be true in either situation. Heifetz would advise us of several things:

Foster adaptation. This is the time to address the dysfunctional legacy practices of the past and improvise small experiments to inspire creativity and innovation. We will be facing the need to adopt bar coding, provider ordered entry of orders, and other challenges of the electronic medical record, for example. Staff-driven solutions, not authoritarian leaders, will accelerate the adoption of these new practices and sustain the changes.

Embrace disequilibrium. Heifetz notes that the leader’s challenge is to orchestrate the inevitable challenges to change in a way that is productive rather than destructive. The leader must keep her hand on the thermometer to prevent a meltdown and also support enough disequilibrium so that the organization doesn’t fall back into its old dysfunctional ways. For example, addressing the consequences of failing to adapt performance guidelines for eliminating pressure ulcers or patient falls can generate the discomfort needed to confront the necessary change. However, if this message is delivered in a manner that generates helplessness and inaction, it will set the thermostat in the wrong direction.

Generate leadership. In Heifetz’s mind, leaders don’t have the bandwidth and the personal capacity to carry out necessary change by themselves. However, the collective intelligence inherent in the diversity of the group will achieve change if given the chance. When the leader can give up enough control so that everyone in the group feels ownership, the innovative ideas that will result will guide the change in productive ways. Staff-driven lean projects to simplify the process of medication administration are excellent ways to generate the leadership needed for future challenges.

Finally, Heifetz cautions that the leader must also manage her own thinking and emotions through the adaptive process of change (Heifetz et al., 2009b). The process of leadership can be dangerous and tactics such as finding sanctuaries, reaching out to confi-

dants, and not losing yourself in your role are all techniques that will keep the leader in good emotional and physical shape to confront the necessity to adapt quickly and to lead change. In the fast pace of managing/leading, it is helpful to reflect on these strategies for adapting to accelerated change.

Summary

Biotechnology has taught us that rapid adaptation to changes is the hallmark to survival in the world, and the species that cannot adapt do not survive. We know of closures of health care facilities because the leaders were inept at helping their people to adjust to the needed change quickly. We know of leaders who could not lead their units, divisions, or organizations through the disruption of severe financial downturns or acute shortages of professionals and did not survive. Successful leaders balance the tension between optimism and realism in healthy ways that create the motivation among their people to mobilize and produce productive solutions. We can’t predict accurately what is around the corner in 2010 and beyond, but we know it will be very different than 2009 and the pace of change will be greatly accelerated. However, the successful leader will help staff prepare for several possible scenarios and equip them with possibilities for the future. People who learn to rapidly adapt in the work setting are also well prepared to adapt in their personal lives as they confront an uncertain future. Just as species need to adapt, so do leaders and their people to thrive in the new world of health care. Adaptive leadership is a viable model to carry us into that future.$

REFERENCES