Communication and Relationship Management

Andrew N. Garman, Psy.D., associate professor and director of master's programs, Department of Health Systems Management, Rush University Medical Center, Chicago; Kristine D. Fitz, CHE, administrative director, Office of Transformation, and instructor, Department of Health Systems Management, Rush University Medical Center, and Maria M. Fraser, senior director, Office of Transformation, Rush University Medical Center

In our previous column, we examined professionalism, a skill set that articulates the unique contributions of health services administration or management to health services delivery. The competency featured in this issue—communication and relationship management—leverages professionalism, allowing healthcare professionals to develop, cultivate, and maintain effective working relationships.

WHAT THIS COMPETENCY ENTAILS

At its core, the communication and relationship management competency is about how clearly leaders understand the people they work with and how effectively they use that knowledge in building high-performance working relationships.

The Healthcare Leadership Alliance (HLA)[1] identified 13 domains associated with this competency. Several of these domains focus on relationships and communication at the organizational level (e.g., knowing the organization's structure and relationships, understanding public relations, communicating organizational mission and vision). Other domains focus on the departmental level (e.g., facilitating alternative dispute resolution; practicing and valuing shared decision making; creating, participating in, and leading teams). The remainder are centered on the communication and relationship processes themselves (e.g., identifying and using resources to help deliver communications, identifying stakeholder expectations, demonstrating integrity and engendering trust).

Of these, one competency domain stands out as pivotal to the effectiveness of the rest: demonstrating integrity and engendering trust. Although the HLA lists these two abilities under the same domain, they are different enough (and each is important enough) to merit separate treatment.

Demonstrating Integrity

Integrity is often associated with its moral definition—that is, the extent to which a leader adheres to a particular set of values. While high ethical standards are very important in healthcare leadership, ethics is best characterized as necessary but not sufficient for leadership effectiveness. In the broader sense, leaders are known to display integrity when the people they work with view their decisions and actions as clear and consistent. All else equal, leaders who make a point of seeking input from the people they work with, making decisions in a methodical manner, and explaining their thinking to those affected by their decisions will be viewed as having higher integrity.

Engendering Trust

While integrity generally revolves around an individual's clarity of purpose and action, engendering trust relates to how a specific individual views his or her working relationship with a specific leader. As a general rule, trust is not given or gained freely; employees will not trust a leader until that leader has earned their trust, through a combination of displaying integrity and demonstrating that the leader understands and respects employees' wants and needs. Once earned, trust carries forward only with regular maintenance and can easily be diminished through even a single indiscretion. Leading effectively in such a climate requires consistency not only in purpose but also in follow-through; the leader must constantly be asking, about each person they work with, "What commitments have I made to this person?" and "How well am I doing in meeting those commitments?"

Leaders need to strive to honor commitments whenever they can; however, how leaders handle failed commitments can be even more important in trust building. If a leader cannot honor a commitment, employees will need and expect an explanation; that explanation will build trust in that it demonstrates that the leader recognizes the importance of commitment to employees and conveys accountability and clear judgment. For example, telling an employee, "I'll see what I can do" explicitly promises action, but it also implicitly promises that the leader will circle back to the employee to explain what was done, why it was done, and what resulted.

HOW TO BEST DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Note that mastery of this competency is only an entry ticket to leadership effectiveness. The competency must be consistently applied within the context of daily work interactions. Over time and with consistent application, this competency will yield its payoff.

With these basics in mind, a manager or a leader can follow two important steps in developing more effective working relationships. First, recognize the association between effective relationship management and overall effectiveness, and make a firm commitment to actively improving professional relationships. The firmer the commitment, the greater the outcome.

Second, challenge yourself to seek out, and be fully vulnerable to, feedback from colleagues about your communication and relationship management skills. This step is often particularly difficult, because often our natural tendency is to challenge feedback by offering our own perspectives to "correct" others' "misconceptions": "It's not that I blew off your request, I wanted to follow up, but X and Y got in the way" or "I'm not avoiding talking to this person. I just think it's more efficient if I do the work myself." In this instance, you may need to actively and mindfully challenge yourself to view others' perspectives as valid and reflective of their experience. First ask, "How would you like me to handle this differently in the future?" before defending your action or providing your side of the story. Once these steps are taken, you will be in a better position to focus your developmental energies more appropriately.

In terms of developing your skills in this competency, we recommend finding a mentor, coach, or trusted loved one to help you.[2] Relationship management, in particular, can involve examining the way you generally relate to other people as well as trying out new and unfamiliar methods of interacting with others. This self-evaluation can feel both risky and emotionally taxing; however, having additional support from those you trust will not only expedite your development process but will also make it more bearable.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN USE THIS COMPETENCY

Because of the intimate and highly contextual nature of this competency, development in this area is almost impossible to achieve through training workshops or to legislate through formal expectations. For individuals to develop this competency, they must commit to, and take responsibility for, their own improvement. With this caveat in mind, organizations can help, and hence also benefit, by putting in place some systematic interventions.

Ties to Organizational Values

This competency readily complements most organizational values statements by focusing on enhancing work relationships such as collaboration and teamwork and building respect. The competency can also be woven into the performance appraisal and performance management processes to create an explicit expectation that employees will develop and practice communication and relationship management as part of their jobs.

The "On-Boarding" Process

Regardless of how effectively an organization manages the development of talent, there are occasions when leaders need to be brought in from the outside. Regardless of a new hire's skills, he or she will come into the organization at a comparative disadvantage. The efficiencies that the new person's peers take for granted—for example, knowing the ideal people to call to get things done—must be built up from scratch, a process that often takes months. Organizations can help new leaders jump-start the development of these relationships by structuring an on-boarding process for their new hires. The process does not need to be highly formal or comprehensive; sometimes just ensuring that relationship development is an explicit expectation of a new hire's first few months, along with some active assistance in making these connections, will go a long way in ramping up the new hire's effectiveness.

Relationship Maintenance and Repair

Relationship conflicts are an inevitable outcome of the labor of leaders; successful navigation of these conflicts, on the other hand, is not inevitable and often requires additional work. As leaders, the most common pressure we feel is to move on to the next challenge without reflecting on the fallout from the last. This time pressure is often used as a handy excuse for not addressing the stickier issues of relationship development and repair. Organizations can help leaders ensure their relationships remain strong by endorsing (and, as needed, enforcing) processes in which periodic "check-ins" between coworkers are expected. For example, many organizations have adopted 360-degree feedback as a way to periodically assess how leaders are managing their relationships. Building in an explicit follow-up step, in which leaders discuss their results with everyone who was eligible to respond to the feedback survey, will create an expectation that conversations of this type are taking place. When organizations provide resources for follow-up (e.g., feedback facilitators, coaches), they make the most out of opportunities to examine and improve working relationships.

Notes

1. For more information on the HLA's work on competency, visit www.healthcareleadershipalliance.org/directory.cfm.
2. For a useful guide on identifying and selecting executive coaches, see Dye, C., and A. Garman. 2006. "Appendix D: Executive Coaches and Other Professional Mentors: When and How to Use Them." In *Exceptional Leadership: 16 Critical Competencies for Healthcare Executives.* Chicago: Health Administration Press.

For more information on the concepts in this column, please contact Andy Garman at andy_n_garman@rush.edu.