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Critical Thinking in a Didactic World

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Wouldn't it be great if all we needed to do in healthcare was follow protocol, process, and procedures? I'd love a world that was only black and white—in the form of checklists and algorithms. But that certainly isn't the reality--particularly in an industry where changes are happening at an increasingly rapid pace.

Even if you think that the Department of Labor, the EEOC, etc. dictate what you do as an employer, that's only part of it. We as employers and managers need to think not only about how we implement policies, but why it is important. This

is essential when explaining guidelines to employees, or when orienting new managers. Explaining why a policy or a standard is crucial takes critical thinking, and connects an individual's responsibilities to the organizational strategy built on its mission, vision and values. The why therefore becomes the essence—particularly when change imperatives are upon us.

When people ask human resources if a particular action or practice is “legal”, they may be looking for the yes or no answer, or the black or white answer. As a longtime HR professional, I can attest that most HR professionals actually spend most of their time navigating in the “gray zone”. The organization relies on this type of critical thinking to ensure a less chaotic, more consistent and constructive workplace culture. It's essential that executive leadership and management exercise critical thinking every minute of every day. I certainly find this to be true at Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital. Our most effective leaders navigate challenges and opportunities and count on their team members to demonstrate critical thinking no matter their position.

The Studer Group®, a trail blazer in developing strategies for achieving

and sustaining exceptional clinical and operational outcomes, employs the AIDET© model: Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explain and Thank you. When AIDET is present, it's been consistently proven that, “Patient perception of care is higher and quality clinical outcomes are more likely.” I believe AIDET can also be an effective tool for employees. A model which ensures that an employee thoroughly understands exactly what is expected of them, and why. AIDET provides the critical picture of how their individual work not only directly affects patients and their families, but also can connect them to their co-workers throughout the organization. The understanding of the connection in turn produces an engaged workforce—a workforce fully cognizant of its mission, vision and values.

People often make the mistake of surrounding themselves with people who may think similarly. It's easier that way, isn't it? There's certainly less conflict. However, easier isn't always better and less critical thinking may result. The September 2011 issue of the Harvard Business Review focused on “Embracing Complexity”. Gokce Sargut and Rita Gunther McGrath, authors of a fascinating article, Learning to Live

with Complexity argue the difference between a complicated world and a complex world. “Complicated systems are like machines; above all, you need to minimize friction. Complex systems are organic; you need to make sure your organization contains enough diverse thinkers to deal with the changes and variations that will inevitably occur.” In a companion article, Embracing Complexity, Micheal J. Mauboussin makes a similar observation: “We try to put smart people on our teams. But we don’t think enough about how much diversity can contribute. The key is to find smart people who think differently.”

The lesson? We mustn’t forget about diverse front-line employees and the role they play within the organization. Especially during this critical time when healthcare is transform-

ing and care delivery systems are changing. One strategy Memorial offers its employees is a three day “Living Leadership” workshop. We introduce del Bueno’s model which equally balances Interpersonal Relationships and Operational/Technical skills with Critical Thinking. Each is necessary for individual and organizational success. Often the most difficult to nurture is critical thinking. We witness people hired or promoted because of their solid technical skills in a particular area of expertise. And the mastery of a didactic learning environment doesn’t always ensure success. We know the best care givers, providers and enablers are those which possess a balance in the three areas.

Whether your current challenge is ARRA, CMS, EHR, PPACA, P4P or any other healthcare acronym, I

believe that as our healthcare industry becomes more complex, we cannot afford to lose sight of the important balance between inherent skills and knowledge, and the didactic nature of clinical learning models and critical thought. Our world is not going to get easier—the boundaries between black and white will blur. Don’t allow reform, a law or enactment to take away your ability to navigate in the gray zone. Put that on your checklist.

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Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital is a 226 bed acute care facility providing a range of hospital services. Visit the hospital’s web site at www.yakimamemorial.org

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