



Tone At the Top: Leading Change in Healthcare

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Local pianist, composer and recording artist Kevin Asbjornson recently described the difference between the “tune” and “tone” of a piano. The correlation to leading change is striking.

Tuning is the adjustment of a piano’s strings to the correct pitch, ensuring notes played in octaves or chords will sound in harmony. Tuning is the organizational equivalent of how we connect people, equipment, and workflow. By contrast, the quality of the sound comes from adjusting the piano’s “tone.” When the piano’s tone is matched with the passion of the pianist, pure music radiates from the instrument.

It’s time for those who lead change in healthcare to adjust and establish the tone for change. Establishing a robust tone is clearly possible, but requires some heavy-lifting in dealing with the daily grind in a healthcare environment.

Healthcare organizations struggle to improve workflow and implement new technology or equipment. With lives at stake, these changes can be especially difficult because of unique industry challenges, including:

- **Time Crunch:** Critical staff must work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so there is little time to assess, plan or implement major workflow changes.
- **No Margin for Error:** People’s health and lives are on the line every day, so there is virtually no margin for error when it comes to operating technology or equipment.
- **Complex Organizational Structure:** Healthcare organizations are structured to incorporate a series of checks and balances geared to ensure the highest quality patient care. Therefore, most healthcare organizations have a fairly complex structure, and major changes require the mobilization of each person in that structure.

Tone Must be Established at the Top

Do these challenges mean that all organizational changes will be difficult? No, *but* transitions must be well-orchestrated beginning with company leadership. Successful healthcare organizations recognize that implementing new technology is not a simple technology project, it is a change leadership challenge, and the “voice of change” must be established by the leaders of the organization.

Throughout any change, company leaders must act as “change agents.” Executives involved must be capable of leading and inspiring change, communicating why the change is necessary and needed now, and seeing the project from the initial planning phase through adoption and ultimately sustainability.

Change leadership is a critical component separating healthcare organizations that are successful navigating change from those that fail. When organizations make change leadership a key part of the transition, they gain greater control of the process as well as the overall outcomes, including:

- Rapid and successful employee adoption.
- Employee commitment to master new technology.
- A greater ROI and a higher level of patient care.

Seven Steps For Effective Change

Change leadership should be top priority for healthcare organizations evaluating major transitions, but many don’t know where to start. The following seven steps will help healthcare leaders set the tone at the top, and ensure an efficient transition:

- 1. Create the leadership team** – Select leaders to be responsible and accountable for the transition to new technology. The leadership team should be small, while incorporating each department that will be affected by the change.
- 2. Assess your organization’s alignment** – Conduct a readiness assessment with leaders and a cross-section of employees to determine if there are any gaps in understanding why the change is necessary, the transition process, and the ultimate goals of the project for each department.
- 3. Select change agents** – In addition to your leadership team, it is crucial to select “change agents” to help lead the transition – individuals who are highly respected among their peers, can endorse the changes, and will influence others through their reputation and actions.
- 4. Conduct a change conference** – To kick off the transition, conduct a change conference with all employees involved to discuss: 1) the change leadership structure, 2) handling potential issues, 3) the overall transition plan and timeline, and 4) employee commitment.
- 5. Continual support before and during implementation** – Throughout the process, the leadership team and change agents must help employees work through challenges, provide additional information and resources, and maintain a positive learning environment.
- 6. Follow through to adoption** – Once the organization reaches “go live,” the point at which the new technology is up and running, leaders must remain engaged. Go-live is the most vulnerable phase of adoption when many people run into challenges or develop their own way of navigating the new system.

- 7. Plan for sustainability** – To help transfer ownership of the new application from the leaders to employees, organizations must develop a plan for sustainability. The plan should be long-term, incorporate metrics for employees, and communicate how each employee affects big-picture goals.

It's no secret that change can be difficult. But, with smart planning, strong leaders, and the vision to see the organization through the *entire* transition process, healthcare organizations have a much greater chance of successfully navigating change. Leaders of healthcare organizations who understand and commit to setting the tone at the top and establishing a passionate "voice of change," will pass along the most important benefit – a higher level of care – to each and every patient.

Byline:

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