

Silo Management: It Doesn't Work!

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Here's an interesting exercise. Find a farm in the Midwest that has four silos next to each other. Put your entire nursing staff in one silo. In the second, put your home health aide staff. The third, your medical record staff, and in the fourth, your information systems (IS) staff. Now step back, ask them to communicate and work effectively with each other, and watch what happens. Chaos!

They become focused almost exclusively on their own issues. Quickly, each group begins to feel that its function is the most important one of all. Communication and workflow between departments goes down. And slowly, each department becomes more frustrated with the ineptness and lack of timely response by the other departments.

The nursing department is killing themselves and can't seem to get the home health aide department to respond in a timely manner. The aides think nursing staff are demanding, egotistical, and insensitive. Both departments have concerns about medical records, and which department seems to be always losing paperwork and files. Staff in medical records quickly point out that a growing number of records are incomplete or have forms missing. And everybody is frustrated at IS. They are late. The systems are always down. Any they never seem to be able to produce the types of information needed.

Home Health's Invisible Silos

Is this scenario far fetched? Nor if you are a home health agency that needs all departments to work together to provide, records, and bill critically needed services. How many agency leaders pull their hair out over overflow problems, problems in which one department is seen as the problem child or where one or more departments can't seem to get along or work with each other?

The problem is often the invisible silos found in many home care agencies. These are silos of the mind. The department leader and staff view their work as the single most important work in the agency. They see themselves as a self-contained unit, one that focuses almost exclusively on its task. They view other departments as needing to be responsive to their needs. Their battle cry, "We do great work. What's wrong with them?"

The reality is that they might be doing great work IF all they did was work in isolation. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the success of any agency is not based on the work of one department. It is based on all departments working together to ensure that services are provided, recorded and documented; billings generated; funds collected, and people paid. If any one of these functions breaks down, the whole system is in jeopardy.

Silo management works against good management principles. It leads one department to view another as a problem. It often pits one department against another. Blaming occurs. It isolates people. Unhealthy attitudes develop. And, as one medical record employee privately confessed, "If it weren't for the nurses, this would be a great place to work."

Do You Have Silo Management?

Stop for a moment and take a good look at your agency. Look closely at how smoothly work flows from one department to another. Now, consider the following questions:

- Do your department leaders view their department as the premiere department with all others being subservient?
- When there is a problem that affects a couple of departments, i.e. problems with Medical Records that affects both Nursing and Medical Records, do people in one department view it as the other department's problem?
- Do you have breakdowns when one segment of clinical services does not coordinate services effectively with another?
- Does one department (like payroll) have to constantly chase another department to get pay slips in on time?
- Have you heard people in one department bad-mouthing another?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are in danger of having some level of silo management occurring in your agency.

What is Successful Management?

Successful management in the home care field is when all departments provide exceptional high-quality services AND when all departments recognize that success is the smooth and timely flow of work between departments. If one department fails, the whole agency is in jeopardy of failing.

What can you do about silo management? A lot! Consider redefining job descriptions of department leaders to include demonstrated ability to work with other departments and to successfully problem solve with other departments. Hold a retreat of managers or staff from various departments to develop strategies for working more cooperatively together. Move to a care management model in which clinical staff are on integrated teams. Use interdepartmental redesign teams to address workflow problems. Whatever you do, the key to dealing with silo management is for managers to recognize when there is a problem and to collectively work toward optimal interdepartmental relationships and workflow.

Can silo management work? Sure, if you're storing corn in Kansas. But in the home care field, it is strong interdepartmental problem solving and mutual respect and support that will lead to a successful agency and improved workflow management.

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