On Leadership: Establishing Guardrails in Leadership

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Executive Summary

- To practice in a model of shared leadership/governance, one must believe in the expertise and brilliance that is innate in the staff.
- If staff are not knowledgeable and supportive of the direction the unit/organization is headed, chaos can ensue.
- Leadership is the process of clearly delineating the journey, and establishing guardrails that alert the leader and the staff that their actions will cause a variation to the plan and the journey for that unit/organization.
- With an atmosphere of learning and partnering, the leader’s job becomes that of teacher and mentor, and everyone is aligned around the journey to excellence with guardrails in place to monitor the journey.

Leadership is Creating Guardrails

Leaders come in many different varieties. Some believe in “telling and directing” and others believe that partnering with co-workers is more effective. Peter Block has written extensively on leadership and takes the position that partnerships are the most effective way to manage. He had an “ah-hah” experience once when he was discussing performance reviews. He reflected that he couldn’t imagine calling his wife into his office and telling her it was time for her performance review. He concluded that the relationship between a supervisor and the subordinate should be closer to that of a partnership of equals (Bakke, 2005). Leaders may agree or disagree with this perspective. However, to practice in a model of shared leadership/governance, one must believe in the expertise and brilliance that is innate in the staff.

Creating the Roadmap

In a shared leadership/governance model, the strategy must be clear. If staff are not knowledgeable and supportive of the direction the unit/organization is headed, chaos can ensue. Michael Porter who has written extensively about strategy believes that the leader must create the direction and then be the guardian of trade-offs (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005). In his view, there are many distractions in an organization that can alter the strategy. For example, as new challenges are developed by competitors, people can be concerned about adopting the latest and greatest in a look-alike model. However, Porter would say that the leader must articulate clearly what the unit/organization believes in and not allow people to be distracted from the main mission. It becomes a balancing act between the “telling and directing” model and the partnering model. Leaders must ultimately lead, but do so in a partner-mode versus an autocratic-mode that loses the soul of the staff. Tisch (2004) notes that leaders can’t be in the position of not offering advice, guidance, or tolerating incompetence. Leaders must have the flexibility to listen to the staff, include them in the planning, and also be strong when the direction of the unit is challenged.

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tion often guided by a map or by Mapquest®. The map documents the twists and turns in the journey. And where the road is hazardous, there are guardrails to make sure that we remain safely on our journey. In the clinical setting, computerized infusion pumps and medication alert systems allow us to act within a certain range of tolerance, but once out of that range, we are notified by alerts and reminders that we are varying from a previously established best-practice range. Leadership is the process of clearly delineating the journey, and establishing guardrails that alert the leader and the staff that their actions will cause a variation to the plan and the journey for that unit/organization.

Implementing Guardrails

Shared leadership/governance works well when the direction and the guardrails are in place and well understood. For example, the leader of a unit is responsible for establishing the level of performance for the nurse-sensitive indicators for the unit. Each year the indicators should be raised as part of the continual quality improvement program as goals are reached. The staff, who are responsible for the professional practice of the unit, are the most qualified to implement interventions that will achieve the level of performance with, of course, consultation from other experts. The manager should not accept staff deviating from the journey and ignoring the need to continually improve the indicators. The manager would need to remind them of the previously established road to excellence and employ the guardrails to send out alerts and reminders that the staff is not following the predetermined pathway.

In another example, a mature, sophisticated, and professional staff is capable of self-staffing. The manager can teach the principles of staffing, establish the guardrails within which the staffing must be conducted, and monitor the journey to ensure that the staffing is accomplished according to the roadmap. The manager would intervene when parameters such as fairness, fiscal accountability, and clinical quality were compromised and fell out of the range of tolerance established previously.

As more organizations and units adopt scorecards to report their adherence to a previously established roadmap and performance goals, the concept of guardrails works well. For example, “red zone” units signal an alert that performance on a specific criteria such as patient satisfaction or RN turnover are beyond the realm of acceptability.

With information, coaching, mentoring, and practice, staff can create incredible outcomes. However, the manager/leader must be committed to providing the information and instruction that will determine the success of the task. Heskett, Sasser, and Hart (1990) note that information empowers people and gives them the tools to take on the responsibility of the task and to act in the interest of their customers. By contrast, instructions, policies, and orders are forms of control. In a shared leadership/governance model, availability and transparency of data are essential for the staff to be successful. With information, they can adjust their interventions based on principles as opposed to memorizing instructions that fit very few of the complex challenges of patient care.

Performance as Operating Within the Guardrails

Leadership and management are not an exact science. For example, flexing staff to volume and acuity cannot be done exactly the right way every shift and every week. However, over time the episodes of over and under flexing should wash out and the hours/patient day should be appropriate. If a unit cannot deliver to the budgeted hours and a trend develops that tells the manager that the guardrails are being bumped too often, the manager must become involved to determine the problem before the unit crashes on their journey to excellence.

A common mistake happens when the manager/leader takes back the task from the staff when the guardrails indicate a problem. Porter notes that the best leaders are the best teachers (Mintzberg et al., 2005). We should always see the organization as a continuous learning machine and our staff as eager and willing learners who are always well intentioned. A sure way to kill the enthusiasm and confidence of staff and create distress is to humiliate rather than to educate people.

Summary

Shared leadership/governance offers the best environment for growth of the professional staff and for leaders and managers. Tisch (2004) writes that the power of the partnership begins with the recognition that no one can operate effectively in a vacuum and concludes with the premise that partnerships can redefine the traditional business relationships and transform them from adversarial to cooperative. This happens when the road is clearly delineated and guardrails are put in place as reminders of where the car should be on the road. With an atmosphere of learning and partnering to learn more, the leader’s job becomes that of teacher, and mentor, and everyone is aligned around the journey to excellence with guardrails in place to monitor the journey.

REFERENCES