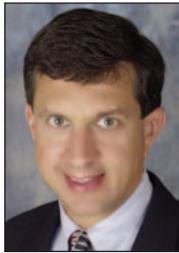


Michael D. Connelly, FACHE



Michael J. O'Brien, EdD

## Reorganize for Effective Communication

*Changing expectations to get more accomplished.*

As senior executives, think about how much time you spend in conference rooms talking with others. These gatherings are critical to your ability to do your job, bringing staff together to work through issues and solve problems. But it often does not happen that way as people have different motives and communication styles, and often these meetings are formatted in such a way as to inhibit productive efforts. In today's fast-paced healthcare environment, it is vital for healthcare executives to use every tool at our disposal, driving change and leading the team in breakthrough thinking.

For this reason, Catholic Healthcare Partners (CHP) decided to rethink the way that we addresses these discussions by creating an innovative leadership approach that better leveraged the collective viewpoints of the senior team and improved the quality of work being done.

### Changing Expectations

For the leaders of CHP, a nine-region healthcare system based in Cincinnati, communication sometimes was viewed as a necessary evil. Eight times a year, the senior management team met at the corporate headquarters to develop a common agenda and to build cohesiveness among leaders from a geographically diverse area.

The purpose was to give everyone a perspective on what was going on in the field. We would try to set goals and solve problems. We also wanted to remind the regional directors that they were not just leading their regions—they had a role on the systemwide leadership team. Unfortunately, we found that our format was not conducive to achieving these objectives because the way we had set up the meeting discouraged team thinking. The participants began to dread coming to these meetings, which put further distance between the regions and corporate.

We asked an executive coach to help us redefine how to interact at these sessions. The results were so successful that many of the leaders have taken the techniques back to their regional institutions to integrate into their own meeting structure. These practices also will help the senior executives transform the way they lead.

As today's healthcare organizations are changing their strategies, structures, work processes and employment policies, they also are facing unprecedented marketplace changes. Whenever there is a challenge of this magnitude, strong leadership is most needed. Unfortunately, that is when leadership is the hardest to provide. Changing the way in which leaders

communicate is a necessary first step to providing this leadership.

### Make Meetings More Effective

*Get the right people in the room.*

Organizations tend to include people in meetings because of where they sit on the leadership hierarchy. The first recommendation we followed was to reorganize the meeting so that the participants included were from the roles they filled instead of the titles they held. Additionally the meeting was split from a one-day meeting into two days with a smaller group meeting on the second day to focus on issues more specific to regional concerns.

*Make the conversation productive.* How many times have we left an unproductive meeting where people say what they really think in the hallway afterward? The key is to "get real" at the conference room table, opening up the dialogue to make the conversations effective. To avoid this situation, put executives into protagonist and antagonist roles to vet out all ideas. The protagonist outlines suggested actions and possible solutions and advocates for a specific plan. The antagonist challenges or critiques, gives constructive criticism, find flaws in the logic, identifies what is missing, lists the probable effects of particular action, and pinpoints the likely emotional reactions of stakeholders.

Using this role-playing technique helps leaders to produce clear thinking on any given issue. The key here is to put the ideas on trial, not the person.

*Get clear on topics for the agenda items in the meeting.* In healthcare, we often find that agendas are filled with informational topics, with one presentation after another, which is not the best use of our time. Informational materials can be distributed prior to the meeting. But when people are face-to-face the time should be spent in productive dialogue. To make sure this happens, CHP adopted a rule that participants must summarize the proposal and say what they want the group to do with it prior to putting an item on an agenda.

*Define your decision-making mode.* In meetings, people are not always sure if you want feedback or consensus on a given decision. Executives must make it clear where they are on the decision-making continuum when presenting a proposal in a meeting setting. The continuum ranges from authoritative (“I decide without your input”) to consultative (“You advise me, I decide”) to participative (“I need your input/help to think this through”) to consensual (“We decide”) to delegated (“You decide without me”). CHP requires leaders to identify the mode under which they are operating prior to discussions.

*Manage not only problems but also polarities.* Sometime executives must also manage polarities. Within CHP, for example, executives need to discuss a variety of fundamental issues: How do we make decisions that serve the system and the region? What are the pros and cons of shifting power between these entities? How do we manage the needs of both? The key to

having these more global discussions is to recognize them for what they are and to strive for a win-win situation.

### **Better Communications Builds Better Teams**

By making these changes our meetings have become more productive. They are no longer viewed as the dreaded home office visit. They are a chance to strategize with colleagues, learn from one another and help solve problems, and there is a collective ownership of the organization.

But these feelings did not happen overnight. At first, people found it threatening. Because the regional executives spent more than 90 percent of their time in their own regions, they did not have the levels of trust needed to work as a system-wide leadership team. They were uncomfortable exposing their strengths and weaknesses in this group environment.

CHP’s leaders now have a greater understanding of themselves and how they operate. This boost to their emotional intelligence helps them to better manage meetings and conversations, increasing their effectiveness as leaders. By raising their awareness of feelings and emotions within a conference room, leaders can manage the direction of the proceedings away from a negative, depowering cycle that causes participants to move into flight or fight mode.

By identifying the feelings inside you, it is easier to recognize them in others and act accordingly. Find ways to validate those feelings

within the meeting structure and then move the discussion forward. Today’s healthcare executives have too many issues to waste time in unproductive discussions. We must constantly work at more effective communications; no one wants to have the same conversation four times and not move forward. ▲

*Michael D. Connelly, FACHE, is president and CEO of Catholic Health Partners. He can be reached at [mdconnelly@health-partners.org](mailto:mdconnelly@health-partners.org). Michael J. O’Brien, EdD, is president of the O’Brien Group, a change leadership coaching firm that helps senior healthcare executives lead better and achieve more. He can be reached at [Michael@obriengroup.us](mailto:Michael@obriengroup.us).*