

LEADERSHIP

Leading Innovation in a Risk-Averse Culture

While most healthcare organizations are focused on operational excellence, many leaders are beginning to see that an equal emphasis on innovation is necessary to remain competitive. But an organization that excels in operational excellence (which minimizes risk) could not be more different from one that excels in innovation (which rewards risk taking). As a leader in your organization, how can you maintain the advantages of operational excellence without stifling the creation and implementation of innovative ideas? Use these strategies:

- **Go first.** Going first means managing your own psychological reaction to innovation. Innovation is uncertain and feels risky. Humans are programmed to avoid uncertainty, and leaders are no exception. After all, the new idea just might fail. If an innovation creates a significant enough amount of change, you could literally fear the change. To keep uncertainty and fear from stifling innovation, you must become more self-aware. In other words, learn to recognize—and resist—when fear tempts you to shift to a self-protective mode and revert back to the old way of doing things.



seemingly opposing concepts with a “both/and” statement, you can open a creative discussion—because stakeholders are no longer locked into their own particular viewpoint. For example, ask, “How can we both take advantage of our operational efficiency and become more innovative in the way we address the needs and desires of our patients?”

- **Shift thinking from “either/or” to “both/and.”** Armed with your new self-awareness, you can now help your staff manage what seem to be polar opposites: being operationally excellent and being innovative. Typically, your organization might look at these concepts as either winners or losers. As a result, management staff from each “side” dig in, communications degrade, and nothing happens. By simply reframing the

- **Be prepared to manage through disruption.** Innovation requires organizations to let go of old work and take on new projects and processes. These transitions are disruptive and create more than the normal amount of breakdowns. Breakdowns happen when people do not do something that you thought they “should” do or when something “should not” be the way it is. Discussing these situations feels risky, and it is during these breakdowns that your leadership is vital. You can turn breakdowns into breakthroughs by accepting and encouraging divergent points of view instead of resisting opinions that are different from your own.

Source: Michael O’Brien, Ed.D., president, O’Brien Group, Inc., Cincinnati; (513) 821-9580; michael@obriengroup.us; www.obriengroup.us.