Essential Leadership Skills, Part III: Fostering Change Through Collaboration

In the first 2 parts of this series, the author defined the need for a clear, compelling vision and building a team to work toward that vision. In this section, the author describes the importance of collaboration to achieve the goals of the team.

Lactation consultants and others working in this field are passionate about what they do. Sometimes that passion leads to frustration and a sense that the ultimate goals are not being achieved. Perhaps the vision is to achieve Baby-Friendly Hospital certification, and the assumption is that “my hospital will never get there” or “they will never give up the free formula.” Perhaps the perception by the hospital administration is that lactation consultants “will not compromise” and therefore are not invited to the table when decisions are made. Fostering the change needed to move toward your vision requires collaboration. To collaborate, you must “consider others and their journey.”1 It requires building relationships with mutual purpose, creating a partnership to achieve a win/win for everyone.

Collaboration Is Not Compromise

Collaboration is not the same thing as compromise. Compromise usually requires one or both sides “giving up” or conceding something; it means finding a middle ground that does not advance either side. Hence, compromise can be seen as a setback for your organization. Because most organizations, as they grow and become more bureaucratic, tend to resist change, compromise is less threatening because it requires less change. The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) can be very threatening to hospitals because it requires institutional and philosophical change. Some states in the United States have developed modified versions of the BFHI in an effort to promote some level of change. They have compromised BFHI by lowering the bar, making it easier to achieve. Have they gotten any closer to the original objective of BFHI certification? Will hospitals that have achieved the state designation see any advantage to working on the still challenging BFHI? This is unlikely.

Not compromising can also be misconstrued as a sign of good leadership—by not compromising, the leader does not give up anything. “It was a high-stakes meeting and I did NOT compromise!” Did your leader advance your cause by being inflexible? Are you any closer to your vision? Sometimes lactation consultants are seen as “uncompromising,” which translates into not listening or acknowledging that there is another viewpoint. A few years ago, in discussing lactation service in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in our hospital, our lactation team was told that the NICU nurses always felt “scolded” by the lactation consultants. We appeared unwilling to compromise on our objective of initiation of breastfeeding before hospital discharge, and so the nurses felt we were not willing to listen to the challenges they faced. We were not advancing our objective at all, and yet we could say we did not compromise on our “vision.”

Compromise, then, is a passive action of giving up something to coexist, whereas collaboration is an active process that involves creating something to grow. Both are important in their own right, but movement toward your vision is more likely to occur through collaboration.

Obstacles to Collaboration

In addition to resistance to change, common obstacles to collaboration can be cost and loss of power. A “major block to creative problem-solving is the assumption of a fixed pie: the more for you, the less for me.” This assumption is rarely true. In pursuing BFHI certification, a common obstacle is the “cost” of replacing the “free” supplies of formula. In reality, the cost is much less than assumed, and there could be other ways to recoup that cost such as other funding streams or return on investment by increased marketability of a hospital that is BFHI certified. To avoid the perception that one side will lose power or influence, leaders must be willing to look for mutual gain. In a true partnership, both sides advance toward a common goal.
Key Elements of Collaboration

True collaboration means building a climate of trust. “To get extraordinary things done, people have to rely on each other.” Building relationships on a foundation of trust is crucial. A recent controversy in our profession involved the scope of practice for International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs). It appeared that the certifying body, the International Board of Lactation Consultant Examiners (IBLCE), and the professional organization, the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA), were in disagreement over this critical document. Who should develop it, who should “own it,” and who might “lose out” were questions being asked by IBCLCs and ILCA members. Identifying the mutual goal of advancing the profession and recognizing that a scope of practice supported by both organizations would be a win/win for everyone were the keys to resolving this issue. It took communication and collaboration between the 2 organizations to move forward. Both organizations had to trust that working toward this mutual goal did not mean one side had to “lose.” The end result: a scope of practice supported by both the IBLCE and ILCA that has more power than one developed in isolation.

Collaboration also means giving value to all ideas, recognizing that you or your team do not have the “only” solution to a problem. For people to willingly share ideas, there has to be an environment where no one perceives that he or she will lose anything by sharing. Even ideas seen as being unpopular must be welcome and thoroughly discussed. My lactation team recently wrestled with the challenge of implementing “rounds,” which was desired by our departmental leadership. Discussing the idea of doing rounds was difficult because of the immediate perception that there was no way our understaffed team could do “one more thing.” We had to sit down together and thoroughly discuss our current system of identifying patients to be seen. As leader of the team, I had to make sure that everyone was heard and that all ideas were discussed. It soon became clear to the team that the current system was not working well either. Once everything was on the table, we could more objectively discuss alternatives such as lactation rounds. Team members who supported the concept felt safe in saying so in front of teammates who opposed it, including their leader! After exploring a variety of options, we defined an approach that everyone supported wholeheartedly. The end result: implementing a new system that achieved a goal of our departmental leadership AND benefited our lactation service.

Good leadership means recognizing that there can be other solutions. When it appears to be a choice between bad and worse, when it appears that your organization cannot advance toward its vision, it is time to collaborate. Lactation consultants must build those collaborative relationships because we have extraordinary things to do and we cannot do them alone.

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References

Additional Reading