

Question-Driven Leadership

audacious workgroup performance



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Case study: A Nursing Home Director Deftly Eliminates Complaints and Outsources Complexity

The situation: 100+ beds and a sufficiently large staff in a medium-care facility.

Patients predictably want excessive attention because they hurt and/or are afraid. In the atmosphere of patients' demands for attention, fears and pain, combined with tight time restrictions and the requirement of zero-error record keeping created tension among even in the most level headed of her people. As director, her biggest problem had been handling complaints from staff and from patients and from concerned family members, pressing concerns which kept her from fulfilling her oversight responsibilities adequately.

The process: We conducted two training sessions, with half the staff one day and the other half another day in using our problem-solving dialogue process called the Segue™. As a group, they chose to address the problem of stress and burnout which were resulting in costly errors and omissions. Compounding the condition was not only job-related stress, but the stress they brought to the job from their life outside. For the Segue™, they chose to focus on how to create smoother inter-shift handoff protocols. During the exploration, it became obvious that tuning up the protocols was helpful but was not going to make a significant difference.

The conclusions: 1. Although the staff was 90% female, they realized that their emotional style was a masculine model of how people interact on the job, which neither suited the makeup of the staff nor did it match the requirements of the work. The significant change they made in the protocols was to allow them to be more themselves when they were handing off updated information to the next person (as well as throughout their interactions with other staff members) without sacrificing professionalism. The workplace became less tense and less stressed which meant fewer errors and fewer sick days.

2. Since the Segue™ employs questions and non-judgmental listening, the Director decided to adopt the practice of asking, "What is the question?" whenever a staff member came into her office. Since everyone came to expect it, this practice had the staff person already contemplating, if not already finding, a solution to the problem. End of complaints. She was clearly delighted as she relayed the story to me. Her supervisors as well came to adopt the practice.

3. One of the results of the practice of leading with questions was that it brought the staff into the process of taking responsibility for the extraordinary complexity of the facility, from tracking meds to trimming hedges. This freed the Director to manage more efficiently the operation without the distractions of minutia.

4. An unexpected result of practicing the Segue™ was the staff recognizing that complaints from patients and family members were expressions of fear more than something they were doing incorrectly. The Director and staff learned to rephrase complaints as questions and to hear the person out, which in most cases, handled the situation. This listening skill resulted in the business having one of the highest satisfaction rates in the state. As a result, the Director was offered and accepted the directorship of a larger, high-profile facility in a large nearby city.

The investment: All this resulted from two half-day trainings and a Director who recognized the leverage she could gain from using well-developed questions to bring her staff onto the same higher performing page.

Operating principle: People want to cooperate and contribute meaningfully to the larger groups they are part of. Up until now, however, there have existed few ways for people to contribute their capacity for intelligent thought and responsibility to the workplace. With Question-Driven Leadership™ and the Segue™, intelligent contribution and shared responsibility for success are integrated into the business culture.

Afterword: Something else happened during that training and during the weeks and months that followed which to me was much more interesting than the time and stress and reputation that were saved and which were the original reasons we were hired in the first place. It is something that we have observed ever since the very first trial we conducted years ago when it was called an “Open Question Circle.” The nature of the Segue™, being in the form of a game with clearly defined roles for asking a question and listening to the response and speaking directly to the question—provides fundamental practice for communicating effectively as person-to-person relating, essential practice which most of us never received in the process of growing up. In other words, doing a Segue™ teaches people skills which they can take out into the rest of their lives to make all their interactions with other people more satisfying and fulfilling.