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## Staff Development:

### *A crucial component of successful leadership*

*By: Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services*

I have shared before the best definition of leadership I have seen: "To expect people to achieve beyond their own expectations, and to create the environment for that to happen."

The first part of this definition is easy to accomplish: set due dates! However, what are you doing for the second part of the equation, which is probably more important? Creating an environment in which people can achieve beyond their own expectations is one of the most important tasks you have as a CIO. And yet, most CIOs probably don't spend enough intentional and planned time to achieve this goal.

Your natural leadership skills and magnetic personality are not going to get the job done. Your staff won't be satisfied with your leadership if all you do is set due dates. As a result, you will probably experience high turnover among your staff as they look for more rewarding career paths at different organizations. This is especially true in competitive environments such as large metropolitan areas.

One way to address this expanded definition of leadership and improve staff retention is via a planned, proactive *professional development program*. Such a program has three key benefits:

- 1. Builds staff morale:** It shows your staff that you genuinely care about their professional future. As technology changes, it's important to let your team achieve and maintain proficiency. In my own experience, I inherited a staff that had obsolete networking skills. The organization was paying outside contractors to perform the very tasks the employed staff should have been doing, but couldn't because they were not current in their knowledge and technical skills.
- 2. Reduces overall costs:** In some instances, it can reduce out-of-pocket expenses. In the example above, we trained the staff to the point they could be officially certified, raised their salaries in recognition of the certifications, and still reduced our out-of-pocket expenses by eliminating the need for more expensive outside services.
- 3. Improves retention:** Staff turnover is annoying, disruptive, and expensive. Recruiting is always time-consuming and gets a low priority compared to other daily needs, and then there's the time it takes for a new employee to get trained



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and up to speed with your policies and procedures. My own experiences have clearly shown that spending a few dollars on professional development will dramatically impact and reduce retention. Twice in my career, I inherited a staff with an annual turnover rate in excess of 20 percent and was able to reduce it to less than three percent within 18 months. An active professional development program was a key part of this turnaround.

### ***What constitutes professional development?***

Lots of things. Professional development includes activities such as formal training for the purpose of getting officially credentialed in a specific skill set, e.g. Microsoft network engineer. It also includes user group meetings; HIMSS; and other professional conferences, meetings, and seminars. If a person is to attend an event (as a perk?), he or she should be expected to bring back two or three specific suggestions which would be of value to the organization (playing golf does not count!).

Training classes to help employees understand a new application, held either at a vendor site or your site, would qualify. Other professional development options could include self-study manuals and classes. These are generally less expensive; however, you must make the time available to take the course, monitor, and follow up on the resulting skill and knowledge improvement. Finally, cross-training within your own department should not be overlooked as an opportunity for employees to grow their expertise.

A proactive, well-executed professional development program takes time and thought to develop. The challenges of implementing such a program can be overcome and are worth the investment. Some of these include:

- **How do you make staff available?** Well, in my own experience, we budgeted FTEs for ten person-months per calendar year. Of the remaining two months, one was taken with vacations and holidays and the other was assigned to professional development. This is not to suggest that every staff member received one dedicated month of professional development each year. We identified specific opportunities for professional development that totaled the one budgeted person-month, and spread this time throughout the year.
- **How do you engage your staff?** Professional development is a two-way street. Employees need to invest in their own development as well. As part of each person's performance review, you can ask what professional development they would like to receive. It was very interesting to identify the employees who just did not seem to care, but were, nevertheless, very vocal that management was not providing any professional development. That represents a cultural issue—laziness—which needs to be proactively addressed as part of the performance review. Once the IT team got the idea that professional development was an expected part of the job, the work ethic also seemed to change.



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- **How can you manage and predict the costs?** As part of the annual budgeting cycle, each manager needs to turn in a professional development plan that includes names, activities, estimated costs (registration, travel, etc.), and a reason for the recommended activity. I found that once this was discussed, included in the proposed budget, and subsequently approved, it became easy to approve and implement the specific activities throughout the year. It also eliminated unexpected requests and disappointments associated with classes or trips (e.g. HIMSS) that were unbudgeted or requested at an inconvenient time.
- **Managing expectations is difficult.** Not everyone will receive professional development each year. Nor will everyone receive the same type of training or amount of funding with ever-increasing budget demands. Defining the criteria for allocating time and funds to staff development is important to judiciously administer a professional development program and set expectations with your employees. For limited budgets, training can be considered a reward for a job well done—it's all in your criteria. It's equally important to define what the employee is expected to give in return—for example, a synopsis of the meeting to colleagues, copies of presentations attended, ideas for improvement, or a brownbag lunch to share impressions with fellow workers. For expensive courses, consider a contractual obligation requiring the employee to stay on staff for at least a year or two after training/certification has been received to avoid the "train 'em and lose 'em" syndrome.
- **Training can be a double-edged sword.** Equity needs to be managed. It is important to avoid concentrating these benefits on a single group of persons unless you're trying to send a clear message to those who do not receive any professional development. Excluding certain groups or individuals clearly conveys your perspective of their value to the organization, *whether intentional or not*. If certain groups do not warrant professional development on a recurring basis, maybe that group and the services they provide are candidates for outsourcing, as you do not consider them strategic or important to your scope of responsibilities.

## Making the case

'We already do some of that!' you may be thinking. However, have you packaged these efforts and marketed them to your staff to get the full advantage? Often such activities are done piecemeal rather than in a formal program, leaving much of the potential cultural benefit—a positive change in how your employees view you and your organization—untapped.

'We don't have the money,' you may be saying. However, a business case can be made based on the potential savings from increasing retention and keeping your staff up to date to avoid contractor fees for routine activities.

The business case usually consists of two expense categories. First, and easiest to look at, are any contractor expenses you're currently paying because your internal staff is not adequately trained. The second category is a bit more difficult to quantify, but possibly a



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much larger number. Go back over the past few years and identify all unplanned vacancies, i.e. people who left for better positions. Assign costs to these vacancies that can include backfilling costs via contractor personnel; recruiting fees; and internal person-hours to recruit, interview, and train new staff. These costs will be substantial, and represent out-of-pocket expenses that can be significantly reduced by improving employee morale.

In summary, continuing education is as important for IT professionals as it is for our nurses and other clinicians. It is critical to the health of your IT organization and is a crucial component of successful leadership. Your staff expects and deserves your intentional effort to help them achieve beyond their own expectations. An important ingredient of this effort is a well-planned and executed professional development program. In addition to demonstrating to your staff that you care, it will make your life a lot easier by contributing to reduced staff turnover. You will also have the budgeted funds available to meet staff expectations.

A well-trained staff with positive attitudes toward their career and you, as their leader, is one of the most important assets you can have. Good luck.