



# RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

*The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.*

—Albert Einstein

**LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW AGE** In healthcare today, leadership requires more than intelligence, more than good management, more than attention to the bottom line. ▲ Today's healthcare leaders must remain informed about changes in healthcare and in society. ▲ They must be in touch with community needs and address—but also move beyond—the daily demands of the job to become transformational leaders. ▲ The following section offers strategies and practices for healthcare executives rising to meet the challenges of leadership in the 1990s.



# REKINDLING THE SPARK

**T**he pressures on healthcare administrators are escalating as the turbulence of the healthcare environment increases. Peter Drucker, a noted authority on management, has stated that hospital administration is the most difficult job in America.<sup>1</sup> Few administrators would disagree.

The turnover rate of hospital executives in Southern California hovers at 30 percent, compared with an annual turnover rate of less than 10 percent for all U.S. chief executive officers (CEOs).<sup>2</sup> One-third of all hospital executives indicate they feel "personally threatened" by the vast changes taking place in the healthcare environment. It is no surprise that the best-attended session at a conference for hospital administrators was a presentation on opportunities for employment outside the healthcare field.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, hospital executives are not the only healthcare professionals experiencing the stress of rapid change. In a survey of physicians in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, nearly two-thirds of them were "pessimistic about their professional future and a like number said they would not want their children to go into medicine."<sup>4</sup> And in a study on chemical dependency, nurses had an abuse rate 50 times higher than that of other healthcare workers. Work-related stress was given as one possible explanation.<sup>5</sup>

The question is, How, in view of the pressures on healthcare administrators, do they stay re-

*Five  
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newed in their careers? How do they keep their psychological balance when everything appears to be spinning out of control? And how do they create a healthy work environment so that staff members feel loyalty to their employer and a commitment to furthering the organization's mission?

A healthcare manager can use the following five strategies to rekindle the spark that once

**Summary** Many healthcare administrators find it difficult to stay renewed in their careers as pressure mounts on an already stressful work environment. Five strategies can rekindle the spark that once made a healthcare career so attractive.

Sharply focused goals are the infrastructure of a harmonious work environment. When people progress toward achieving goals, dissatisfaction with their work environment decreases.

Healthcare administrators must also find solutions to problems that chip away at happiness, such as chronic understaffing or a personality conflict with a colleague. If supervisors develop positive problem-solving attitudes, employees tend to emulate them.

Administrators need to personalize their leadership style. If subordinates sense their administrator is involved in their occupational struggles, their loyalty will increase and their stress will decrease.

A manager needs to be surrounded by creative, energized people because upbeat people have a way of renewing one's spirits. Meaningful friendships can provide support and a fresh perspective on problems.

Finally, healthcare administrators must remain steadfastly hopeful even when budgets cast red ink and the future direction of healthcare is uncharted.



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made a career in healthcare so attractive:

- Focus on goals.
- Solve problems that chip away at happiness.
- Develop a personalized leadership style.
- Cultivate meaningful friendships.
- Remain hopeful.

### FOCUS ON GOALS

CEOs, middle managers, and clinicians have found that sharply focused goals are the infrastructure of a harmonious work environment. When people progress toward achieving meaningful goals, dissatisfaction with their work environment decreases. They feel a renewed sense of purpose and direction in their professional life.

But healthcare administrators' days are filled with problems and multiple interruptions. How can they keep priorities straight when each issue seems urgent in its own right?

The key is to reserve at least 30 minutes a day for quiet reflection—to “center-down,” as the Quakers say. Administrators need time to savor their victories and to analyze situations that did not go well. Equally important, they need time to refocus priorities and shape plans that will restore meaning to their work.

The best time to quietly reflect on one's work varies for each person. I know one manager who refocuses his priorities by putting fun in a 30-minute exercise. A sports enthusiast, he spends the first 15 minutes of each workday reviewing the box scores of sporting events that took place the previous evening. Then he takes the next 15 minutes to write down on a 3 × 5-inch card what he seeks to accomplish during the day. The card is positioned in front of

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him and serves as a reminder of the goals he wishes to realize. “Do you always complete the tasks you define?” I asked. He smiled and said, “Not every day. But if I don't write out the major goals each morning, chances are good they will never be realized.”

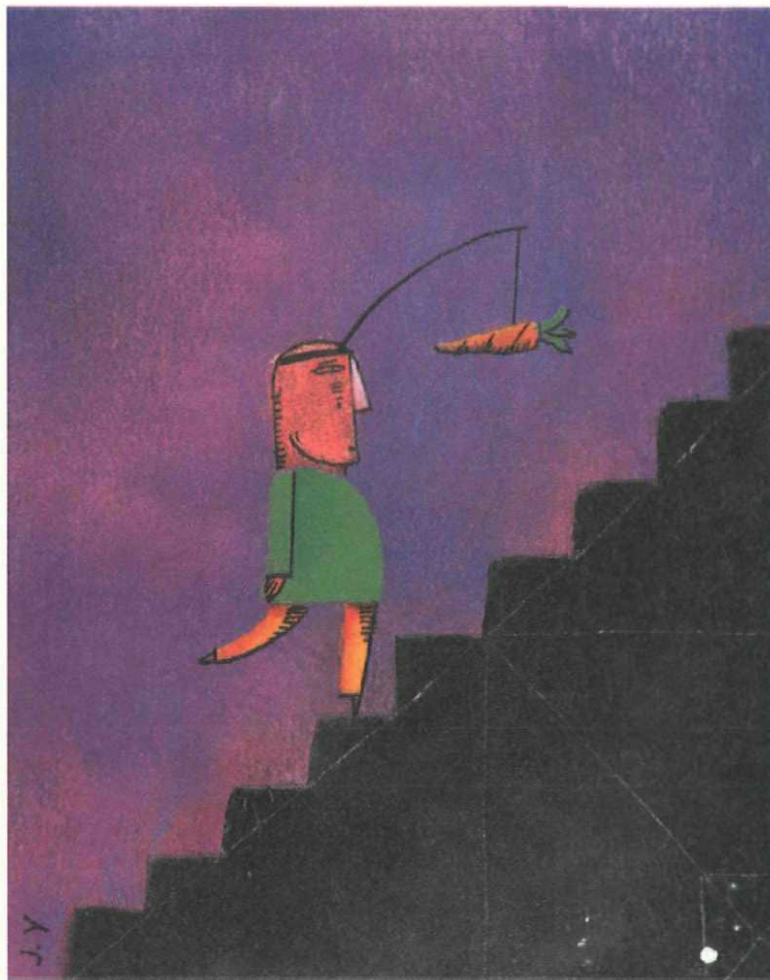
Spending time to “center-down” is but one strategy for focusing on goals. Another is to define the *legacy* one wishes to leave to the organization. The legacy might be a major administrative restructuring that puts the hospital in a better competitive position. It might be the creation of an ethical climate for decision making. Or it could be the development of an entrepreneurial spirit among staff. This legacy, whatever it is, becomes the reason for one's professional existence.

An administrator who oversees a discouraged staff should spend time with them as a group and learn about their hopes and frustrations. Each person should *write* what he or she wishes for a professional legacy and then (if willing) share that legacy with the members of the department.

The results of this simple exercise can be amazing. Staff focus more sharply on their goals and priorities. They see each other in new ways. They learn what is important to one another and understand the values that support each other's work. Most important, this exercise is a reality check on perceptions. After taking part in this exercise, employees typically respond, “I finally understand my colleagues.”

### SOLVE PROBLEMS

Reshaping priorities is the starting point in career renewal. But it is just as important to



James Yang





make a firm commitment to finding solutions to problems that chip away at happiness. These problems might include chronic understaffing, a financial barrier that keeps the organization from realizing its mission, or a personality conflict with a colleague. Whatever the issue, if it undermines job satisfaction, the healthcare administrator should confront it.

In surveys of hundreds of workers throughout the country, I have discovered that one of the biggest impediments to career renewal is the perception that it is impossible to change one's work environment for the better. One frustrated middle manager commented, "I'd feel better about my job if I thought things would change. But the turf battles go on. The personality conflicts never die. And sometimes I wonder whether it is all worth it."

It is impossible to feel renewed if one is convinced that things will never change for the better. That is why it is so important for administrators to meet with their staff to resolve festering problems. When the staff senses progress in dealing with problems, productivity increases, morale improves, and a new sense of cohesiveness emerges.

Why do administrators fail to confront major problems that erode their spirit? Often it is easier to focus on little problems that are easily solved rather than difficult issues that defy resolution. In addition, administrators often develop attitudes that preclude rational problem solving. A vice president for nursing commented, "Nursing budgets are always the first to be cut. My predecessor understood that fact, and the person who follows me will discover it as well. That's the way it will always be in this hospital."

Not necessarily. The key, however, is to examine attitudes that might thwart the discovery of creative solutions.

In his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig illustrates the importance of challenging rigid attitudes by describing how monkeys are captured in India. A coconut is hollowed out and chained to a stake. Inside the coconut is rice that can be reached through a small hole. The hole is big enough for a monkey's hand to go through but too small for the fist filled with rice to come out. The monkey reaches in and is trapped—by nothing more than his own rigidity. As Pirsig states, the monkey cannot see that "freedom without rice is more valuable than capture with it."<sup>6</sup>

How do healthcare administrators get rid of

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self-defeating ways of viewing problems? Consider a dietary supervisor who was perplexed by the sad state of affairs in the hospital dishwashing room. The staff displayed no sense of teamwork. Productivity was low. Petty jealousies seemed to abound. To make matters worse, the personnel turnover rate was unacceptably high.

Because of the seriousness of these problems, the dietary manager made a firm decision to resolve them. But before determining solutions, she spent a few minutes each day observing the interaction in the dishwashing room.

As she listened, she became aware of a strict hierarchy in which each group ("scrapers," "stackers," and "loaders") was reminded of its lower status by the group on the next higher rung. The manager devised a way to make these status differences work for the good of the unit.

She gave each employee a job description and told them they had to follow the descriptions to the letter. But she also made it clear that any employee who continued to meet the specifications would have the opportunity to move up to the next job and eventually could apply for a supervisory position within the hospital.

For the first time these employees saw a way out of dead-end jobs. Productivity went up, the backbiting stopped, and the department produced several competent supervisors.

Although this plan may be inappropriate elsewhere, it is an example of how one manager was able to creatively solve a complex problem—to the delight of both staff and supervisor.

In organizational relationships, subordinates take a cue from their supervisor as to how to approach problems. If supervisors avoid them, subordinates will too. If supervisors believe the issues are unsolvable, only on rare occasions will employees dare address them. But if supervisors develop positive problem-solving attitudes, employees tend to emulate them. The key, however, is to send a clear, consistent message to staff as to what is expected.

Of course, sometimes even clear messages can be misinterpreted. Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, authors of *The One Minute Manager*, give a humorous illustration of how this happens.<sup>7</sup> A man was attempting to train a timid and insecure puppy. Each time the pup urinated on the carpet, the master rolled up the newspaper, smacked the dog's behind, and sent him out the door. After a few days of training, the pup learned his lesson: He urinated on the carpet and





headed right for the door. The moral of the story? Make sure your message is clear, but take time to assess how others are interpreting it.

### DEVELOP A PERSONALIZED LEADERSHIP STYLE

A third strategy for career renewal is to personalize one's leadership style so that key staff members understand your interest in the problems they are confronting. If subordinates sense their administrator is involved in their occupational struggles, loyalty will increase and their perceptions about the amount of stress they experience will decrease. In addition, productivity and morale will likely increase.

In *A Better Idea: Redefining the Way Americans Work*, Donald Peterson, the former CEO at Ford Motor Company, offers some practical suggestions on how a manager can personalize his or her leadership style:

All too often in business, as well as in our personal lives, people we genuinely like or admire have no idea how we feel about them, because we keep it a secret. We think, "Why do I have to say something positive? I haven't said anything critical." We forget that human beings need positive reinforcement—in fact, we thrive on it. As Ford's CEO, I used to write a lot of handwritten notes. I'd just scribble them on a memo pad or the corner of a letter and pass them along. Actually, the best thing a manager can do is pick up the phone and take a minute to thank someone or say, "I was really impressed with what you did." You have to establish a pattern of taking, say, 10 minutes every day to do something to boost the people who work for you. I would argue that these are the most important 10 minutes of your day.<sup>8</sup>

A personalized style is not just a gimmick to get people to work harder and to produce better results. It is a tool to rationally manage change. A personalized leadership style holds promise for diminishing employees' stress. Best of all, such actions often lead to meaningful relationships that may continue long after the administrator's tenure has been completed.

### CULTIVATE MEANINGFUL FRIENDSHIPS

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## PRACTICAL MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES

- Focus on goals.
- Nurture friendships.
- Stay in touch with new ideas.
- Surround yourself with upbeat people.
- Resolve conflicts that erode optimism.
- Reflect on past successes.
- Envision future success.
- Take comfort in your faith.

Creative, energized people have a way of renewing our spirits. They also help us look at problems in a new light.

Before I took an administrative position, a colleague offered me some advice: "Stay away from angry people," he cautioned. "If you do, you will have a long administrative career."

I learned quickly that administrators cannot always shield themselves from hostile individuals. Indeed, an important component of any administrator's job is to mediate differences, soothe ruffled feathers, and find solutions to highly emotional problems. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in my colleague's admonition: Administrators must not let the anger of others dissipate their energy and vitality.

One way a manager can buffer himself or herself from angry people is to spend time with friends who are optimistic about their careers and about life. These individuals do not need to be supermen or superwomen.

Indeed, the best friends are often those who look to us for support in confronting their own struggles. Such persons can warn us if our thinking is distorted and provide a fresh perspective on our problems. Elton Mayo once observed: "One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider our problem, can change our whole outlook on the world."<sup>9</sup>

Where can a person find such confidants? Generally, the workplace is not the place to find them because it is difficult to be completely honest with peers. In addition, work associates may have a vested interest in the outcome of any problems shared with them.

Therefore it is more appropriate to find a con-





fidant in another organizational setting, such as an acquaintance who has similar responsibilities in a different hospital, a former classmate, or someone in a completely different line of work whose insights can bring a fresh perspective to the challenges one faces.

### REMAIN HOPEFUL

Finally, if administrators want to stay renewed in their careers, they must remain steadfastly hopeful, for as the philosopher Gabriel Marcel once wrote, "Hope is perhaps the very substance our soul is made of."<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to remain optimistic when budgets cast red ink and the future direction of healthcare is uncharted. It is even harder when personal problems threaten happiness.

In the bleak moments of life we need to remember that hope and discouragement are intertwined. The French words *espoir* (hope) and *desespoir* (despair), like the Dutch words *hopen* and *wanhopen*, form a symbiotic relationship. Or, as Paul Tillich observed, chaos and creation belong to one another.

As paradoxical as it may seem, hope has its roots in despair. Hope evolves out of discouragement, and it often would not arise otherwise.

In June 1955 Winston Churchill was near the end of life. Nevertheless, the former prime minister agreed to give a commencement address at a British university. He needed help getting to the podium. Once there, he clasped the lectern firmly, head bowed, for what seemed an interminable time.

Finally, he raised that great leonine head, and for the last time in history his firm, sound voice was publicly heard: "Never give up! Never give up!" With that, Churchill returned to his seat.

The crowd was stunned by the brevity of his remarks. Then with great enthusiasm they broke into applause and gave him a standing ovation. They knew his words came out of pain and suffering. Countless times he had been criticized by others. On three occasions his career seemed over. Yet somehow he harbored a profound sense that there was still something left, even after the worst had occurred.<sup>11</sup>

How do you stay hopeful, even when negative events cloud your vision? One of the most important strategies is to define one task that genuinely excites you. It might be starting a major new project, spending time with colleagues who need your encouragement, or draw-

ing up strategic goals that would better position your department or organization to meet the demands of the future.

Whatever the undertaking, there should be one aspect of your career that entails risk. As the American actress Sissy Spacek has noted, "When I'm pushing myself, testing myself, that's when I'm happiest. That's when the rewards are greatest."<sup>12</sup>

### MEET THE CHALLENGE

To be certain, these are challenging days for healthcare administrators. But most of us have experienced difficulty before—either personally or professionally. And somehow we have survived. Perhaps at this juncture it is time to pause and affirm the words spoken by Abraham Lincoln during a time of great change:

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.<sup>13</sup> □

### NOTES

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