

## Being positively hierarchical

“What do you mean it took three years to get hand-washing to desired levels?” During Michael Gardam’s engaging presentation on change management and positive deviance, I kept going back to this challenge of getting hospital staff to embrace a new standard.

Have we so forgotten that the point of work is to achieve organizational strategy and increase shareholder value (however defined) that we are prepared to tolerate three years of the potential spread of superbugs in hospitals while we get everyone on board? I am a shareholder in Ontario health care and I find that unacceptable.

The means by which Gardam ultimately achieved the reduction of superbug transmissions is fascinating, and it joins a chorus of powerful new ideas about bottom-up, emergent change and complex adaptive systems. But from the perspective of organizational effectiveness, and of the timely achievement of strategy, sometimes leveraging top-down hierarchical authority is the better call.

After all, it is inevitable that we work in hierarchies — it is in our nature. So let’s take advantage of that and use the mechanisms within “positive hierarchies” that promote change, not hinder it: strategic intent, managerial accountability and effective manage-



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rial leadership.

Without strategic intent at the executive level, bottom-up change will peter out or, at best, live on in isolation. Gardam took his orders to reduce the spread of superbugs from the executive level of the University Health Network, not the ward staff. Without that intent, his change efforts would not have even begun.

Without managerial accountability, change is unlikely to stick. Unless all managers at all levels are held

to account (by their own managers) to implement change, then change is driven by individuals’ sense of

responsibility, not the strategic will of the organization — and, as such, it will be adopted indiscriminately.

With managerial accountability, any initiative (including transformational change) flows from the C-suite to the shop floor (or ward) like it’s riding a conveyor belt with quality assurance checkpoints. Reciprocally, if all direct reports are held accountable to provide their best advice to their managers who are accountable to listen to that best advice, then tactical, continuous improvement (team change) goes the other way as well.

Finally, by holding managers to account for continuously growing team capability, change is inevitable, encouraged and ongoing.

Current practices in effective managerial leadership already involve much of what Gardam is proposing.

Surely, by now, any manager understands it is her accountability to provide direction, resources and coaching to her team, not to instruct the team on how to do their work.

Any manager quickly discovers

that managing — managing change included — rarely succeeds by diktat. As Gardam mentioned, one size does not fit all and every team and every team member requires a customized solution created in dialogue with those who will experience the change.

In this model, it may well be that managers identify their positive deviants and encourage them as agents of change, but it is the manager’s call to make — not a change expert stalking the wards.

There needs to be a meeting of the minds on top-down pushing and bottom-up pulling (or is it the other way around?).

Gardam proposes that “change spreads in infinite ways,” including emergent change from individuals on the front line. But we should not lose sight of the fact that one of those ways is using the energy and focus provided by hierarchies.

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