



Pittsburgh Regional Healthcare Initiative

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Naida Grunden, editor

Leaders who transform: *courage, commitment and clarity*

Despite the best intentions and efforts, most patient safety improvement efforts end up relegated to a stack of “promising beginnings” or “interesting ideas.” Translating such

initiatives into sustained, effective ways of doing business requires healthcare organizations to transform themselves into learning organizations—where caregivers possess capabilities, opportunities, and incentives for solving problems at the point of care. Absent this change, even the best-conceived clinical and technical “solutions” will be local and temporary. Transforming tradition-bound health care organizations calls for fundamentally rethinking how organizations change, and the role of leaders in making this happen.

Leadership Qualities

More than resources, more than technology, transformational change requires leadership qualities as timeless as medicine itself—*clarity, courage, and commitment*. Clarity of purpose means never losing sight of the irreducible essence of health care—patients and providers at the point of care.

But just stating these values clearly is not sufficient. Everyday behaviors, decisions, and routines need to be infused with them. Initiating this process requires courage, since leaders must base their decisions on non-traditional premises—advocating simple and strong solutions rather than “big” solutions, initiating change with insufficient evidence and with a view to creating evidence.

While clarity and courage initiate change, only sustained commitment can make change take root.

Change in complex systems is non-linear. Long periods of little discernible improvement give way to sudden dramatic transformations. These dynamics can play out only if there is unrelenting and uncompromising commitment to the transformation process.

Two out of three won’t do. Courage and commitment can bring about change. But without clarity, change may not serve the core values. Clarity and courage will launch ambitious efforts. But

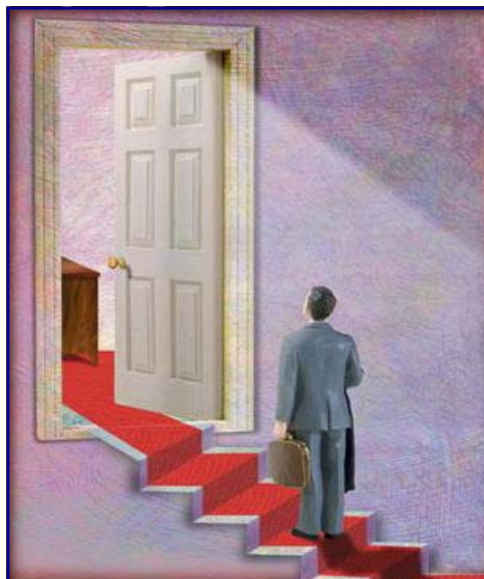
without commitment, they will be short-lived and disappointing. Clarity and commitment will generate a sustained search for solutions. But without courage, the gulf will widen between what is said and what is done. Courage, clarity and commitment: all three are necessary to implement change.

The Leader’s Role

What is the leader’s role in transforming an organization? Useful pointers come from of

other organizations that have undertaken fundamental change:

1. **The leader’s primary role is that of a designer.** Leaders play a variety of important roles such as decision maker, motivator, etc. But in building a learning organization, their most important job is to design a way to make it easy for employees to learn and difficult for them not to. Often learning is left to chance and individual choice. The design of a learning organization should



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address both the “hard” stuff such as structure and technology as well as the “soft” stuff such as shared values and culture.

2. **Change efforts should be targeted at attitudes, ideas and behaviors.** Attitudes and ideas form the foundation for change, but ideas must translate into behavior. Talk of “good communication” and “blame-free culture” does not create them: they must be actively, consistently demonstrated by top leaders. Attitudes improve and ideas emerge when leaders help people change their task-related behaviors (by redesigning their work), and show them how to solve longstanding problems in their jobs. The leader’s task is to initiate change, ensuring that this change is tightly linked to operational problems at the point of care.
3. **Transformation in complex organizations requires simple and strong solutions, not “big” solutions.**

Healthcare organizations are complex. They encompass an intricate network of providers and patients interacting across multiple locations and at different times. Planning for every situation is impossible. Transformation depends on getting people throughout the system to make choices and solve problems based on a core set of incontestable and unchanging values. The task of the leader is to accelerate the development of these shared values so that they become the premises for decision making and problem solving throughout the system. This leads back to design, which must reflect the values. ☞

Ranga Ramanujam, PhD, is an assistant professor of management at Purdue University’s Krannert School of Business, where he teaches courses in organizational behavior and change management. His research examines the causes and consequences of errors in organizations. For PRHI, Dr. Ramanujam is a member of the evaluation team for the AHRQ grant on patient safety involving PRHI member institutions.

