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A Rational Approach to Career Change

by Diane M. Otte, R.N., M.S., O.C.N.

Like it or not, the reality of hospital mergers, consolidations, and downsizing are forcing many of us to confront career changes. No longer can we expect lifelong employment within a single organization or corporate responsibility for an employee's life and career. The prospect of losing one's job as a result of hospital restructuring or downsizing is all too real.

The change that accompanies job loss can offer new opportunities, new working relationships, different experiences, and many possibilities for personal growth and development. The down side of this change, however, includes a host of dangers, most notably uncertainty, shock, and anger. Individuals must deal with the dangers first before they can take full advantage of the opportunities available to them.

CONFRONTING THE LOSS

Hospital mergers and layoffs are painful and affect people at their basic survival level. When individuals first hear about the possibility of hospital consolidation, they ask many questions. What's going to happen to me? Who will go and who will stay? How will management decide? How can I be one of the survivors?

During this period of uncertainty and ambiguity, employees search for information about how they will be affected. Often, there are more questions than answers. The result is an information vacuum, with employees becoming skeptical, mistrustful, and insecure.

Responses to the possibility of job loss or change vary. Some people become aggressive; others lie

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low, trying to stay out of the line of fire and waiting for the smoke to clear. Individuals take steps to protect themselves and start looking out for number one.

The psychological shock waves of hospital mergers and downsizing usually cause a new set of organizational problems. Communication becomes tangled as employees keep information to themselves. Productivity drops; people waste time thinking and talking about the changes to come. They are less willing to make decisions or take risks and more willing to do nothing rather than do wrong. Teamwork suffers. People become protective of their own department and may no longer work well together. Everyone starts jockeying for position. Low morale, weakening commitment, and loss of sense of direction are common.

As we are all aware, people experience predictable emotional patterns when a significant change or loss occurs in their life. Many times the first reaction to change is the initiation of the grieving process. The theories of grieving are just as applicable in a situation of job loss or a change in perceived status as when dealing with the death of a loved one. Steps in the grieving process include shock, denial, anger, and sadness. Finding the appropriate means to express anger is critical if one is to move on to the next steps, sadness and finally acceptance. At this point, one is able to look at the positive as well as the negative aspects of the change.

A GAME PLAN FOR CHANGE

People who have accepted the fact that jobs for life are probably no longer an option will be among the first to have formulated several ideas regarding their plan of action if asked to leave their job next week. Once they have dealt with the fear of "What would I do?" and have

made a plan with several options, the fear will never be as intense again.¹

The first step in any plan is to identify your priorities, including your values and lifetime dreams. Write down your options, which might include returning to school, trying another clinical area, retreating for a while and reflecting, spending some time with family, or finding another job immediately.²

Next, make a list of your current skills and those that you may need to acquire. Today everyone should keep an updated resume, one that demonstrates the value of your skills and experiences rather than simply lists generic activities. Promote what you can do for an employer.

Today's employers are looking for people with leadership skills who can perform a variety of functions and who understand how to achieve customized results. In your resume and cover letter, highlight your leadership qualities, which are essential during times of change. The successful health care leader is one who will be able to create solutions—not just identify problems—and can help propel the organization forward. A solution person has a much better chance of success. That person should be able to:

- strategize, design, plan, and implement integrated care delivery systems.
- define results in operational terms and provide proof that outcomes are achieved.
- define, create, and transition organization cultures to meet new operational strategies.
- be viewed as a global thinker who is capable of transcending one's own professional and personal biases to focus on the greater good of the organization and client
- take down, undo, and relinquish current structures and processes in order to replace them with new approaches.

■ initiate, create, and support the changes necessary for the organization to move agilely and nimbly into the future.³

EASE ON DOWN THE ROAD

Self-care and stress management are transitional stages that move an individual from danger to opportunity. The self-care process to a healthy adjustment involves ten steps.^{4,5}

1. Control your attitude. You can choose to become focused on all the negative aspects of the merger or throw your energies into correcting the problems. One of the most common mistakes is to ignore the positive potential of a merger.
2. Be tolerant of management mistakes. What looks like a mistake may in fact be precisely the right move for management to make. Be aware that there are no easy answers. Try to understand the changes from the management viewpoint, and concentrate your efforts on becoming part of the solution rather than part of the problem.
3. Expect change...and be an agent for change. People will have to adapt to new bosses and reshaped performance standards. Be flexible and show initiative. Yet, don't act for the sake of action. Evaluate all options first.
4. Don't blame everything you don't like on the merger. Don't assume that all the changes are the result of the merger. A merger may in fact bring desired improvements.
5. Be prepared for psychological soreness. New demands will be placed on your mental muscles. Old habits will need to be broken, and work will be done differently. Since you cannot stop most of the changes the merger will bring about, become involved with the changes, rather than trying to fight them. Eventually, the psychological soreness will go away. The key to surviving this step is to be innovative, adaptable, and communicative. Find someone to talk to, a respected individual who will take an interest in helping you evaluate your strengths and opportunities. Choose a counselor or friend who can help you put into words your dilemma and feelings, so you can better understand what is going on.
6. Get to know the other company. You will have to train yourself to start looking for the good in the other firm and its people. The merg-

For Management: Five Steps to Guide Staff Through a Merger

1. Plan carefully. Premerger planning is critical to a merger's success. A "plan, announce, act" approach can help to reduce employee anxiety and eliminate fear of the unknown. Strategic goals, physical location, and economic benefits of centralizing services should guide development of the new organization's structure.
2. Assure that decision making is unbiased and decentralized. Authority for final decisions should reside in positions that are not predisposed toward any specific hospital. Decision making and the resolution of conflicts should take place at the lowest effective level in the organization. Key activities should be integrated, participatory, formalized in writing, and responsive to changing market conditions.
3. Communicate effectively.

Regular communication with employees to correct false information is vital. If employees have an opportunity to participate, they are more likely to buy in to the merger.

4. Manage human resources and enlist supporters. Selecting leaders who are skilled in managing people as well as change is critical to facilitating transitional events. These leaders act as role models and assist in keeping others focused on the benefits of the merger.
5. Resolve conflicts. Committees and forums should be available for decision making and conflict resolution and should involve and balance all key viewpoints. Constantly assess employees' discomfort levels. Listen to employees and offer opportunities for expression of anxiety and fears.

er is a two-way street. You will have to go out of your way to learn how the other company does business. Volunteering to participate in transition teams or work on merger committees is one way to become involved.

7. Use the merger as an opportunity to find out what is waiting in the wings of your life. Transitions clear the ground for new growth. This can be a real turning point, a time to look at your job performance, decide how you can improve it, and set new goals. Use the transition as the impetus to a new kind of learning. This may be a good time to go back to school. A professional career counselor or career development workshops can point you in a new direction or help you develop a written plan to reach your career development goals. Assess your values, strengths, and abilities honestly.
8. Keep your sense of humor. A good cry every now and then is good, but a laugh also provides an emotional release. Try to find humor in the situation.
9. Practice good stress management techniques. A loss of confidence and self-worth is common as the merger process drags on. Work on managing your own stress, perhaps through relaxation training. Minimize as

many other stresses in your life as you can. If you do lose power or prestige as a result of the merger, do not take it personally.

10. Keep doing your job. Don't let your problems, frustrations, and fears become an excuse for neglecting your work. Recognize that transition is a slow process.

In any ending there is an emptiness; then life begins anew. Your survival depends not so much on what happens to you as on how you handle what happens. It's up to you.⁶ ■

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