

“Avoiding the Meeting after the Meeting”

Twenty administrators from a northwest hospital met me in a retreat-like setting to discuss the perplexity and concerns as to why their staff members and employees were engaging in what they called, “the meeting after the meeting.”

Apparently, there was a growing concern over the issue of office workers meeting around the “cooler” to discuss how they *really* felt after the most recent staff meeting, rather than honestly opening up to management about their frustrations and ideas. Before we brainstormed a strategy to address the concern, we discussed why the phenomena occurred in the first place. The consensus was that the employees did not trust the current “culture” in hospital management.

CULTURE

The “culture” or office climate has to do with how management *actually* treats, communicates, manages and implements change with the staff. I say *actually* because as far as management was concerned, their culture **was** open, approachable and interested in staff concerns and ideas. However, the perspective of their team was vastly different. The staff didn’t feel there was openness at all, and that if they truly shared their honest opinion in a staff meeting, their voice would only be tolerated. In the worst case, the employee would have to face some form of administrative retribution if they were honest with their employer.

This actually happened in an organization I worked with. I was conducting a workshop on developing honest communication skills when the director stated to her team that she really wanted them to know she was open to constructive criticism regarding her management style. When an employee sheepishly stated that she simply needed to be more available to staff concerns, she not only responded defensively but later called him into her office for a personal reprimand. Of course, not only did this director lose the confidence of the entire staff, but she was eventually terminated because of the severe lack of trust from that point on. You see, her “culture” which she verbally stated was open to honesty really wasn’t!

REBUILDING CONFIDENCE

As the administrative team discussed this concern with me, we came up with some reasons why staff members would hold the “meeting after the meeting.”

- 1) Fear of retaliation if they are honest with their opinions.
- 2) Previous attempts at honest communication were not validated or listened to.
- 3) Other staff members agreed with their personal perspective.
- 4) As a newer employee they haven’t earned the right to speak up yet.
- 5) Apathy because “nothing changes anyway”.

These were just a few of many reasons they felt employees wouldn’t open up. However, in addition to understanding some of the causes of this problem, (which was more than half of the battle); we also discussed what management could do to alter the perception that they really didn’t care or couldn’t be trusted. We titled this part of the discussion, “How to Prevent the Meeting after the Meeting.” These were some of the essential changes that they suggested could help:

- 1) Verbally assure staff (again) in the next meeting that honesty with management is welcome.
- 2) Acknowledge staff hesitation to open up due to past experiences with management.
- 3) In the future when a staff member voices an idea or concern, be sure to get back to them with some acknowledgement that they were heard.
- 4) In the future, better communicate any policy/protocol changes that can potentially impact their unit or department and even solicit their input and participation in those changes.
- 5) Encourage one-on-one conversation if any pertinent questions need to be addressed.

The list continued to grow with more discussion. It eventually became clear to all that there needed to be a shift with their management style and what became important was what their staff was feeling (or better said, what their perspective was) rather than what administration thought they communicated.

I believe that this group of hospital administrators was beginning to understand that if there was low morale in the ranks below, they at least needed to assume responsibility for their management style from the top down.

They wanted their staff to feel safe to open up to them about their ideas, concerns and even frustrations. They began to see that they couldn't effectively lead any further than employees were willing to go. This required that information would be discussed openly in the staff meetings rather than around the "cooler" where true feelings and questions were shared but never adequately heard. They wanted change as administrators and were willing to take the next step to make it happen.