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Compliance & Ethics PROFESSIONAL®

A PUBLICATION OF THE SOCIETY OF CORPORATE COMPLIANCE AND ETHICS

JUNE 2018

Meet Thomas Topolski, CCEP-I

Executive Vice President,
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see page **18**

by Terry Lawrence, MBA, CEO

Embracing leadership mistakes to drive cultural transformation

- » Leaders have the freedom to grow and take risks by embracing their mistakes.
- » Being transparent about leadership mistakes enhances a culture of compliance.
- » Acknowledging leadership mistakes builds comfort with compliance reporting.
- » Continuous improvement, trust, candor with respect, and ethics and compliance drive cultural transformation.
- » Transparency with leadership mistakes creates healthy corporate cultural growth.

Terry Lawrence (tlawrence@bonejoint.net) is the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer of the Bone & Joint Clinic in Wausau, WI.

Close your eyes and picture yourself actively participating in this real-life experience. (You will find yourself in complete amazement.) As a business leader in your organization, you arrive on a Thursday afternoon for your administrative leadership monthly huddle. Your CEO begins each meeting with a personal greeting and a sincere welcoming message. What comes

next could have you gasping for oxygen and planning your immediate exit from the boardroom, but this healthcare organization's leadership and compliance culture is different. Here the CEO supports open discussion of leadership mistakes across the organization, leading by example. The leadership monthly

huddle begins by having each leader share with the leadership group one recent mistake, mishap, and/or screwup within the previous month. The leader shares the details of the mistake, key takeaways and learnings, what he/she will do differently next time, and any process or system needing to be implemented to ensure success. The purpose is for leadership development, continuous learning,

and colleague support. You have probably guessed this by now. Who do you feel is the first leader to share one of his/her mistakes? You are correct—the CEO.

The chief executive officer shared:

As the CEO, I have a number of interactions with leadership, staff, providers, and patients through rounding on a daily basis. As I was rounding in one area of our organization, I had a less than ideal interaction with one of our staff, which led me to overact with that staff person's supervisors. Upon self-reflection, I made the realization, scheduled time with the supervisors, and made a sincere apology. My behavior and efforts had solid intention, but my presentation failed.

The CEO made the strategic decision to embed ethics ambassadors across the organization to assist in driving the cultural compliance message. One of the responsibilities for the ethics ambassadors is to drive cultural transformation at the staff level. These key stakeholders attend a variety of monthly business meetings to



Lawrence

help communicate the message of the CEO and cultural tone. “It is OK to make mistakes across the organization. Learn from your mistake, apply self-reflection, and embed new practice behaviors.”

A clinical manager shared:

Being able to share a mess up with my fellow leaders and the officers of the organization was an unusual practice for me when I started. I was able to share in my past organization with only a select few fellow leaders that I could trust and I knew would help coach me for the next time I was in a similar situation. As I attended one of my first administration team meetings and participated in sharing a mess up, I saw heads nodding and looks of sympathy, because others had been in a similar situation and could relate. I knew I was not alone in my leadership journey. This helped me quickly gain an understanding of my new co-leaders and what they considered important and how they as well as I could reflect on a situation and consider how to do things differently in the future. Sharing mess ups takes trust and emotional intelligence from all members of the leadership team. This is important that I can share and can trust others not to judge me while also getting a feeling of support.

As we move along the organizational chart, this unique practice of leadership development and continuous improvement does not stop with senior leadership and middle management. The CEO executes the same practice of sharing mistakes with the board of directors for the organization. WOW! Just as leadership for the organization found

this practice unsettling initially but embraced it over time, so did the board of directors.

A revenue cycle supervisor shared:

Being on the newer side of management sharing “mess ups” scared me to death! I already didn’t like speaking in front of large groups (even when it is people I know), but to have to admit I messed something up in front of my peers, out loud? Mortifying! The first go around, I carefully selected which not-so-bad mess up that I had courage to share with the team. It was certainly awkward at first; I mean nobody likes to admit they messed up! But the more I attend our meetings, the more I hear about the struggles of other management team members, and I realize I am not alone. The one thing I find most beneficial about sharing mess ups is the overwhelming support from my team of leaders when I feel I have failed at something or I am facing a challenge that I need help with.

At the heart of cultural transformations are continuous improvement, trust, candor with respect, and ethics and compliance. As we all know, developing, maintaining, and sustaining a corporate compliance culture initially lies on the shoulders of leadership.

We need to lead by example, walk the walk, and talk the talk. We all have heard how important it is to hold people accountable, execute on responsibility, and cascade education and communication throughout the organization to achieve cultural success.

The privacy officer shared:

I had asked someone to work on a project, and when the completed project

was presented to me for review, I noted not everything had been completed in its entirety. I questioned the employee only to find out I had dropped the ball. I did not provide all the necessary information needed to fully complete the project. Needless to say, it required an apology to the employee and owning up to the fact that I had dropped the ball.

In the words of the chief financial officer:

Our current culture has truly transformed itself into a culture of trust, respect, and high-performing employees. It started by embracing our mess ups, learning from them, and moving on. We all make mistakes, so why beat ourselves up if we truly learn from them. Use them to fuel our positive energy. When we free ourselves of worry and fear of failure, it is amazing what a team can accomplish. We hold ourselves accountable but do so in a respectful way, knowing that

we are all fully engaged, and we put our heart and soul into our work. We fail and succeed as a team, and we rally around our teammates when they need our support.

Conclusion

We are building a corporate compliance culture based on this core principle: making mistakes drives self-improvement, self-reflection, and self-reporting. Our corporate culture is refreshing, team-building, humbling, and patient- and quality-driven. All of these cultural attributes drive world-class personalized customer service and customer experiences.

My message for all of you is this: *Embracing leadership mistakes to drive cultural transformation should appear on your strategic plan.* For all those CEOs who have not taken this opportunity to lead in this fashion, please reach out so that I may support you in your journey. And, don't worry if you make mistakes trying this; you will learn and send a valuable message to everyone in your organization. *

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03.26.18