Navigating Institutional Politics

Politics are inevitable in most workplaces. Whether psychologists work in a traditional medical environment or other institutional settings, the key to success lies in developing skillsets to help you navigate organizational politics, build alliances and gain influence.

Physicians do not tend to treat people in groups. Consultations, examinations, procedures and treatments are individual patient encounters. It is not surprising then, that physician productivity in institutional settings often is measured in scheduling slots. Every slot equals one patient.

It struck Kathleen Ashton, PhD, ABPP, a health psychologist in the Cleveland Clinic’s Breast Center, that her productivity was grossly undercounted by this metric. Ashton could see several patients in a group session and it was tallied as one patient encounter. Indeed, the success of group programs was key to her department’s successful performance for the clinic and, more importantly, for its patients.

This simple observation occurred to Ashton while directing a group program at the clinic. Thanks to her attendance at administrative meetings on budgets and productivity metrics, her positive working relationship with her medical team, and some other relationships she had taken the time to forge, Ashton had the tools, institutional access, and influence she needed to fix the problem. She made a business case that the current metric was as bad for the clinic as it was for her program. She wanted to count each patient individually.

A simple observation with an easy solution, yet resolving it took a politically astute practitioner in the right place at the right time. Psychologists generally eschew politics and receive little training in the business side of practice, but in institutional settings, politics matter for patient outcomes.

As collaborative care models become more prevalent, psychologists in institutional settings are called upon more than ever to fill the types of leadership roles traditionally reserved for physician administrators.

“It is important to be savvy about financial considerations,” said Ashton in an interview. “Having that language is important for psychologists when they want to make program proposals.”

Panelists and attendees of the Navigating Institutional Politics workshop at APA’s 2017 Practice Leadership Conference shared insights and experiences to help colleagues better succeed professionally and improve patient care in institutional settings. Ashton was joined by: Kathleen S. Brown, PhD, a former interdisciplinary pain management director and psychologist at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu; Jared Skillings, PhD, ABPP, chief of behavioral medicine at Spectrum Health System in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Ryan Warner, a counseling psychology doctoral student at Marquette University in Milwaukee.
Map the landscape. Every organization’s culture, lines of communication and channels of authority are somewhat unique. Knowing the organizational chart is essential, but only scrapes the surface. Personalities drive politics. Power can aggregate in surprising places under effective leaders. Those leaders may be natural stakeholders in a project you value, and you may need their support to achieve your own goals.

Brown cited the opioid crisis as an example. She launched an interdisciplinary pain management program at Tripler, and owing to its success the program was elevated to its own department. Suddenly she held a position equal to physician department heads who did not fully understand what she was accomplishing.

“I needed to get out of my department to see who my allies were,” she recalled. Primary care physicians were operating at the front lines of the opioid crisis. They embraced the value her program offered to help them manage pain and improve functioning for their patients while decreasing the risk of addiction.

Psychologists frequently limit themselves within their own subculture in institutions dominated by physicians. Skillings suggests that psychologists break free of their silos and usual modes of speaking, and become more assertive.

“We need to stop being bashful about what we are good at,” he said, adding that physicians are unlikely to mince words when they want something done.

Acquire skills. Psychologists receive little training in budgeting, cost management and performance metrics. Fortunately, educational resources abound. The APA Practice Organization and APA offer members a menu of career-development tools to supplement the professional skills graduate programs do not provide. Management coaches and online courses are another option.

Brown’s job at Tripler involved reducing the cost burden and improving the care of chronic pain, yet she recalls, “I didn’t fully appreciate the extent to which money drove care in the current system.” She gained much of the financial training she needed from resources offered by APA Practice Organization.

Challenge biases. Negative biases and micro-aggressions complicate politics for too many practitioners. Warner shared an incident when he was working at a correctional institution. He used an expression that was culturally African American and was admonished for using “inmate language” rather than what staff deemed appropriate language.

Amplification is an effective influence-building strategy in diverse organizations that may unintentionally permit subtle biases and micro-aggressions, such as talking over or undervaluing diverse contributors. Diverse stakeholders back up each other’s opportunities to influence decisions by seconding motions, or citing and sharing their contributions. They need not agree on the desired outcome of a decision, rather they are supporting each other’s right to be heard. In less diverse environments, however, holding your ground and calmly correcting micro-aggressions may be the only option.

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– Jared Skillings, PhD, ABPP

“Ninety-nine percent of the time,” noted Warner, “I am the only African American male in the room.”

Seek support at all levels. Thinking horizontally, as well as vertically, when seeking alliances creates political opportunities. Brown sought allies in other departments who could advocate for the interdisciplinary approach. Some of her best allies turned out to be data crunchers in the budget and finance department.

Choose mentors wisely. “Take advice from people who have been there and done the work – people who have demonstrated leadership,” Skillings said in an interview. Beware of the expert who has never demonstrated expertise, he cautioned.

The goals of good mentorships are mutually understood and focused, such as skill development. Mentors need not be top executives, although those relationships have the added benefit of developing your influence. A peer with a skill you lack may also be a helpful mentor. ⚙

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