

“BIG TIME BACKUP”

A Case Study on Becoming a Systems Thinker

‘Twas the week before Christmas and all through the house, not a patient was moving ... *at least not out of the ED!* It’s flu season and the hospital is nearly busting at the seams with patients. The inpatient census has soared, and it looks like the hospital is going to exceed budgeted volumes for the month by 10%. Not everyone’s smiling, however. Inpatient beds are tight, the ED is backed up and the ED wait times are long. Not surprisingly, patients are beginning to complain about the delays.

Ellen, the ED Manager, arrives at 0600 and for the 5th time in as many days she finds several patients waiting for inpatient beds. She is keenly aware of the critical need to move admitted patients out of the ED as quickly as possible, especially in light of the new initiatives to improve customer satisfaction. She certainly doesn’t want to see any low scores on her unit surveys! She also needs to keep the ED clear so she can accept new patients. After a few quick calls, she is relieved to learn that several patients are scheduled for discharge this morning.

Melissa, the Med/Surg Manager, arrives at 0600 finding every bed full, patient acuities high, and her staff pushed to the limits. In addition, several nurses have called in sick, so 1st shift will be running short. Unfortunately, an 0300 computer downtime has delayed the printing of all lab and radiology reports. The doctors have already begun morning rounds and are upset that none of the lab results are on the charts. The final blow comes when she learns that Environmental Services will only be able to send 2 staff members to clean rooms today.

By 1000 Ellen is furious that despite repeated calls to the units, she’s not been given one bed on the floor. She’s also appalled at the “bad attitude” of the unit secretary. She thinks to herself, “*Doesn’t she know what kind of day I’m having?*” She checks the unit census reports in the computer and finds that there are still no clean and ready beds. Angry, and convinced that the units are purposely not releasing rooms, she pages Susan find out what’s going on.

Questions:

Is this a systems issue?

Yes! It is a complex problem that requires a focus on the systems issues versus just individual performance. It is also likely an ongoing, recurrent problem that could use a fresh approach.

What are some of the environmental influences (internal and external) affecting this situation?

- *Christmas season; seasonal illness- more patients, less staff*
- *Traditional conflict between ED's and nursing units- "silos"*
- *Tendency to reward individuals/unit success rather than organizational success*
- *Public perception- long ED waits*
- *Concern over low patient satisfaction scores*
- *Technical difficulties- computer reports*
- *Support departments (EVS, etc.)*

What immediate steps do both Ellen and Melissa need to take to resolve the current situation?

- *Don't make assumptions about motives or workload of other department*
- *Check own emotions- be calm and non-accusatory*
- *Assess situation in own department- what's needed to care for all the patients?*
- *Separate emotion from fact as you listen to others*
- *Commit to finding the best solution for all patients*

How do the perceptions of each manager affect the resolution of this situation?

- *Assumptions about the other department staff and manager*
- *Belief that most of the burden is on their own unit/staff*

Discussion:

- Discuss the effect of organizational culture on this situation.
 - *How are decisions made?*
 - *How open and honest are the relationships between the decision-makers?*
 - *How is conflict resolved?*
 - *Is there a shared vision and values for all of patient care services?*
 - *What are the communication systems in place?*
- Discuss the characteristics of a living, social system as they relate to this situation.
 - *Wholeness- how do the parts of the system interact with each other?*
 - *Connectedness- the actions of one component of the system don't necessarily have a predictable effect on another component*
 - *Identity- Beyond a common goal and purpose, who is responsible for doing what?*
 - *Dynamic balance- as one component of the system maximizes it's functioning, the whole system is suboptimized, rather than stabilized*
 - *Creativity- the urgency of this situation requires immediate action, but a more long-term solution will require time to think and plan creatively.*
 - *Openness- how free-flowing is information; how easy is interaction; how safe is it to challenge the status quo*
 - *Flexibility- how adaptable is the system to change in response to the environment?*
- Compare and contrast a linear vs. systems approach to this situation.
 - *A linear approach would focus on the individual departments and the functions within them. Each department would try to determine a cause and effect relationship for the situation. One would try to improve the situation by focusing on what the "other" department could do better, rather than considering the inter-relatedness of their processes.*
 - *A systems approach would look more at how the two departments relate with each other and what efficiencies could be gained by working together more effectively. The focus would be on process rather than people. They would work toward a solution based on common mission, vision and values.*
- Develop a systems diagram for this situation.
(Have group identify inputs, outputs, throughputs, feedback and environmental issues)
- Discuss how these system behaviors would support resolution of this situation
(see above answers)
 - Shared leadership, vision and values
 - Cross-functional collaboration and communication
 - Customer focus