

ALIGNING THE STARS:
The Essential Act Of Dialogue Within Senior Healthcare Teams

Lawrence Levin, PhD
CEO
The Levin Group
Atlanta, GA

There are three reasons why needed dialogue often doesn't happen within healthcare organizations and seven keys to designing an artful "Advance" (as contrasted to a retreat) to surface and resolve issues affecting the healthcare organization's bottom line.

Those of us who have been part of running a healthcare organization know full well the importance of teamwork and communication at the most senior levels of the organization. Yet we find, when working with our new clients, that executive teams often don't do a great job of being fully candid or having open and high order dialogue with one another – even when the stakes are high and the winds of change are in the air. It is not unusual for senior healthcare team meetings to be characterized by careful, deliberate presentations often so well-polished that the "real" issues never get surfaced. Dialogue (from the Greek dia-logos) literally means an exchange of ideas. Good dialogue is essential in producing strategic thinking and effective implementation that creates competitive advantage.

It is a cliché to say that it is lonely at the top, but it is a cliché that is true. Who does the CEO or President talk to? Senior teams are stocked with experience and talent, but most CEOs do not utilize this skill base or leverage the loyalty formed from working closely together for many years. Who do members of a senior team confide in? While meetings at an executive level occur frequently, powerful, honest, and open dialogue is rare.

What makes good dialogue often so difficult for such competent and experienced healthcare executives? Three reasons for the difficulties are:

1. **OLD HABITS DIE HARD:** Senior meetings take on a form and rhythm based on history, culture and habits. A common phrase is "it's the way we've always run these meetings." Since old habits are hard to break, a shift in focus is usually required to allow good dialogue to occur.
2. **CULTURE IS A SHADOW OF CEO STYLE:** Dominant personalities and titles often dictate the comfort level, content, and degree of disclosure within senior teams. True alignment is only reached if people can shoot straight, differ publicly, raise different ideas and dialogue fully. Being careful won't get you there.

3. **WHAT IF IT GETS WORSE?** A fairly common fear is that truly open dialogue will create conflict or worsen issues that are simmering. Many senior teams choose to keep a lid on those issues that are commonly known but not dealt with. The team leader must set the bar for either being candid or being careful. Issues which go unexpressed and unresolved consistently limit the very things that an executive healthcare team is tasked to do. If you can't talk about it, then how can you do it better, or different, or faster?

THE ART OF THE ADVANCE: ALIGNING THE STARS

While most healthcare organizations have periodic “retreats,” great executive teams practice the “Art of the Advance”— scheduling deliberate and focused time to ensure that critical issues are discussed and the team is playing to its full potential.

Seven variables separate an “Artful Advance” from a common retreat:

1. **WHEN CULTURE AND CHANGE COLLIDE...** culture usually wins. To change the culture of how a senior team operates, you must change the behaviors and norms with which it operates. Focused and deliberate “Advance” time is a powerful force in which to surface old behaviors and support a culture that is flexible, adaptive and competitive.
2. **THE MOOSE IS LOOSE:** The ability to “put the moose on the table” and talk openly about real, sometimes difficult issues is what differentiates this experience from a typical planning or report-out session. Total candor and productive dialogue about the “real stuff” has a major impact on the future direction of your company.
3. **FOCUS ON PROCESS AS WELL AS CONTENT:** An “Artful Advance” focuses not only on critical content issues, but also on the process of how well the executive team works. The dynamics of relationships, roles and responsibilities, authenticity, communication and power are essential factors in creating a powerful and effective team from a group of skilled individual players.
4. **THE SOFT STUFF DRIVES THE HARD STUFF:** True alignment among senior healthcare teams requires a balance of dynamics and teambuilding (the soft stuff) as well as an unwavering focus on competitive strategy, clear deliverables, and effective implementation (the hard stuff). At the end of a good “Advance” we often hear experienced healthcare executives ask “why is the soft stuff so hard?” Typically executives are paid for bottom line results – tangible stuff. So even while acknowledging the importance of process issues, it is usually not their strongest suit.
5. **DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME:** Using an experienced guide in the form of an outside facilitator is a critical success factor. Any substantive “Advance” must deal with the real issues. Interviews with senior team members, their direct reports, and thorough homework on the organization is a requirement for doing good work. Good guides are hard to find. Well-intentioned ones are not.

6. IF IT AIN'T BROKE, WHO CARES? Moral of the story – have these “Advances” regularly. Yes, you are busy and it’s tough to schedule and yes, it’s even harder when things are going OK. But the difficult truth is that if you want an aligned healthcare team, it requires work and frequent maintenance.
7. Lastly, HAVE SOME FUN here. While it is called ‘work’ for a reason, a good team needs the lubricant of laughter and irreverence to truly want to work together and produce great results!

ACTION STEP: Ask yourself—what are the important issues your executive team doesn’t talk about? What are the issues you as a healthcare leader notice but don’t know how to address? Ask yourself—what could our team accomplish if these issues weren’t in the way? Just by taking time to notice and acknowledge these issues, you will be taking an important first step toward “aligning the stars” within your organization.

Lawrence Levin, Ph.D. is founder and CEO of The Levin Group, LLC (www.TheLevinGroup.com), a national firm that provides consulting and facilitation services to healthcare organizations. Larry has over 20 years of experience in understanding and accelerating execution of major business change and initiatives. He operates as a strategic partner with CEO’s and Executives in crafting strategy, improving individual and organizational effectiveness, improving physician alignment and facilitating senior level “advances.” Contact him by phone at 404/377-9408 or by e-mail at lslevin@TheLevinGroup.com.

COPYRIGHT 2003 © The Levin Group, LLC.