THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN HEALTH SERVICES MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Establishing professional identity in the field of health service administration is essential for the development of the profession in Georgia. Use of professional organization membership is critical to enhancing professional identity and societal recognition of the profession. Appropriate management training and the use of services provided by professional organizations enables individuals to become leaders in their professional disciplines, and offer significant contributions to the health care profession and community.

Introduction

Professional identity is the cohesiveness created among professionals who share a given discipline that instills common professional beliefs, goals, and objectives. Within the field of health service administration, one of the most important career objectives for an individual is to establish professional identity and have a code of ethics. These elements allows the health care professional to contribute to the field and develop appropriate recognition among and between other disciplines. Effective communication between disciplines reduces barriers and increases interactions with peers to enhance professional outcomes and improve the delivery of health care services and systems in the community at large.

This paper examines the key elements of a profession and addresses the importance of professional organizations in the process of forming a professional identity, a professional code of ethics, benefits of membership within professional organizations, and examples of professional organizations for health service administration.

Central and Eastern Europe and The NIS Countries

It is in the direct interests of the United States to build partnerships for health and to exert greater leadership in transnational health problems. Global health transcends national boundaries and has become a more pronounced issue in the globalization of the world economy. As U.S. business leaders are responding to rapid globalization, professionals and educators in the health sciences can provide creative and entrepreneurial leadership in the areas of research and development, surveillance, education and training, global partnerships, coordination and leadership (Institute of Medicine, 1997). A significant reorientation and restructuring of health services and systems is needed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the NIS to address economic pressures, social-political disequilibrium, and primary health care needs of people. Planning or strategy development is one of several processes needed to navigate and manage change (Rice, 1994). New strategies, paradigms and models must simultaneously address health management education as well as broad-based institutional restructuring to achieve a market-oriented health care sectorial transformation (Cleland, 1994). Global health advocacy is in the best interest of all nations in a global health village.

In Georgia, democratization and a free market economy has resulted in immediate opportunities for change in the health care sector. However, with a severely depressed economy, the sustainability of health system changes is a major problem (West, Kremery, Rusnakova, Murgas, 1998). CEE/NIS countries

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have focused on cost control measures to respond to economic pressure which has created social - political concerns regarding access, quality and health status. The reform debate on health policy coupled with incremental changes has precipitated social tension and disequilibrium in organizational structures (Saltman, Figueras, 1997).

Transformation efforts of the health care sector in Georgia employ strategies of privatization, liberalization, decentralization, marketization and transnationalization. There is little empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of these approaches to reform policy and responding to macroeconomics pressures. Given the chaotic nature of economic reform and democratization processes, new approaches/models are needed to address discontinuous changes requiring nonlinear interventions. Global intersectorial action through transnational cooperation and partnerships requires collaborative strategies to address inequities between and within CEE/NIS countries (World Health Organization, 1998).

Movement from a state of socialism to a free market economy requires the preparation of health care managers who will be able to provide leadership on complex issues, respond to change and develop new organizational structures, services and systems of health care (West, Krcmery, Rusnakova, Murgas, 1998). Change creates discontinuities and disequilibrium conditions requiring global teamwork and collaborative interorganizational relationships. Health sector reform and transformation requires the existence of a variety of social structures to implement strategies of localization, harmonization and optimization of resources between providers, the public and consumer. This is especially true when attempts are made to shift responsibility from government to the private sector using privatization policy and strategy.

Health care transformation efforts in CEE/NIS require effective and systematic management. The development of health care management infrastructure needs to be addressed at several levels: university prepared managers, education for established managers, and a systematic continuing education process to maintain current skills and knowledge. Establishing a new system of health care management capable of responding to current changes and future initiatives (demands) in the CEE/NIS region is a challenging task (Aaronson, West, Heshmat, Ramirez, 1998). Aaronson and West (1997) in the introduction to a special issue of the Journal of Health Administration Education state:

“In any paradigm shift, academia has the opportunity to contribute to the development and understanding of the new paradigm. At the core of the philosophical shift from state socialism to free market economies is the central role of management in the capitalist enterprise. Academic institutions that are preparing the next generation of leadership for health care enterprises can have a profound effect on the ability of management to achieve the skill and confidence levels necessary to become change agents.”

**Professional Organizations**

One of the most significant ways of establishing professional identity and contributing to development of new paradigms for change is through membership in professional associations. Professional associations have clearly defined missions, goals, and objectives established to assist members. Professional organizations give members an opportunity to develop a professional identity with their peers as well as provide recognition for what society refers to as a “professional”. These organizations focus their efforts on providing the highest quality of professional development services (i.e. continuing education, support services) to ensure that members provide proper standards of management for organizations in order to facilitate the best possible care to customers and various stakeholders. Professional organizations focus on creating leaders, not managers. The work of Bennis and Nanus (1995) as well as Covey (1989) helps to explain and differentiate managers and leaders. In the book Leaders, Strategies for Taking Charge, leadership is defined as a “morally purposeful and elevating: allowing higher degrees of consciousness, including liberty, freedom, justice, and self-actualization” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).
Management is defined as “a set of contractual exchanges or agreements that result in association compliance” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

Leaders, through development of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), match vision with key organizational values and mission to create social, political and economic support systems. Managers do not have the ability to create vision and in actuality create an environment in which power is rooted in their position. Management is more task oriented while leadership involves empowerment of individuals. “Management means doing things right, while leadership means doing the right things.” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

Covey in his 1989 book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” offers the following difference between leadership and management. “Leadership is primarily a high powered, right brain activity. It is more art than based on philosophy, while management is more left brain activity which involves analyzing, sequencing and specific application of activities (Covey, 1989).

In sum, leadership involves the ability to impart vision, values, and creativity. It is decision-making and prioritizing, constantly adjusting the current system, creating opportunity, excitement, and energy in an organization. Leaders create synergy throughout all parts of the organization. Professional organizations and associations seek to develop individuals who are leaders in their field. When the individual succeeds, the professional organization succeeds, as well as the professional health care management team.

**Standards of the Profession**

Drastic changes have taken place in the scientific and technological base of medicine which have significantly altered the delivery of health services and the development of health systems. These changes affect every health care professional but have particular relevance to health services administrators. The delivery of health services occurs within the context of some type of organization, and therefore health services administrators must be concerned with the human, technological and physical resources that make the modern practice of medicine possible.

The key elements for the health management profession includes a unique body of knowledge, collegial relationships, services orientation and a societal mandate to practice. These key elements of the profession occur within the context of management as an art with a strong scientific base. Managers must learn how to make decisions, establish objectives, structure organizations, motivate people and manage resources. Health service administrators think in terms of the management process which implies specific actions taken to reach certain endpoints or produce certain outputs. Longest (1990) defines management “as process, with both interpersonal and technical aspects, through which the objectives of the health services organization are specified and accomplished by utilizing human and physical resources and technology.” In the practice of management, there are specific functions performed or facilitated which include planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling. Katz (1974) identified three types of skills needed in the practice of management which includes technical skill, human skill, and conceptual skill. Katz further suggests that not all managers will need to utilize these skills but that every manager must rely on these skills in the performance of their work. Mitzberg (1975) contends that understanding the manager requires an examination of the different roles played by the manager fulfilling managerial responsibilities. These roles include interpersonal roles, informal roles and decisional roles.

In addition to understanding roles and functions of managers, it is also possible to look at health services administrators from the standpoint of standards utilized in the profession. Some of these standards have values which underlie fundamental behaviors. In order to implement the elements of the health management profession, it is possible to operationalize professional behaviors through several venues:

1) a special way of life,
2) continuity of purpose,
3) professionalism,
4) professional identity,
5) a sense of direction,
6) a life style,
7) refined skills,
8) governance,
9) professional autonomy
10) interdisciplinary practice.
Health service organizations operate in a high velocity environment involving continuous change and the health services administrator is subjected to this same dynamic world. How the manager responds depends in part on professional identification, recognition and KSAs.

**Special Way of Life**

Health service administrators are held to higher personal standards by the profession and society. There are significant expectations from the community and consumer. Each professional organization requires that certain professional standards be met via implementing a code of ethics as well as maintaining certain educational standards. Senior health care executives find every aspect of their life affected by their chosen profession.

**Continuity of Purpose**

Health service administrators must have some type of vision for the future. Although it is impossible to accurately predict what will occur in the future, administrators engage in a planning process whereby certain decisions lead to achieving specific objectives and/or outcomes. Health service administrators have as a core purpose the provision of high quality, cost effective care for the patient. This overall purpose and direction permeates the health service organization and provides a continuity of purpose for the organization as well as developing an important corporate culture. Finally, the provision of health services normally requires a 24-hour operation by the organization, and as such, health service administrators practice the profession across all areas of their life, 24 hours per day, 365 days a year.

**Professionalism**

The health services profession can be described as heterogeneous as compared to other industry which has a more homogeneous work force. Professional disciplines in health service organizations have different levels of training and service requirements to the profession and community. However, the higher standards for health services administration require the ability to work with multidisciplinary teams in interdisciplinary settings. The harmonization among and between professions is difficult to achieve in most health service organizations but specific professional behaviors must be present and exhibited by the health service administrator in order to allow professionalism to be part of the culture of the health care organization. Health service administrators are committed to ongoing education, teaching, service and scholarship within the health organization and profession.

**A Lifestyle**

Administrators in the profession are motivated by core values and fundamental principles related to the provision of health services. As the professional interacts in the health care organization, the same person lives in the community and interacts with society. Service to society is important in meeting
specific obligations of the profession, and it is essential that positive attitudes and character be exhibited at all times by the administrator. This is often referred to as authenticity and congruency which are important characteristics and qualities for health care leaders to exhibit within an organization, the profession and community.

**Refined Skills**
Health services administrators and leaders must develop specific skills related to the body of knowledge of the profession. At a more personal level, administrators engage in a continual process of introspection and reflection as they lead an organization into the future. Articulating the vision for an organization requires the ability to develop refined intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills. Coordinating interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary teams in a heterogeneous environment is extremely difficult. Maintaining confidentiality at all times, offering services in the best interest of the patient, as well as making decisions that are proactive requires the development of refined skills in the practice of management. Finally, social activism is necessary in order to solve difficult problems that exist within the organization as well as the health care community in which the organization, resides.

**Governance**
Managers affiliate with professional organizations and associations for several reasons. Each organization, specific to a discipline of health services administration, has a code of ethics and articulated values that provide guidance to the manager and leader. Each profession requires different levels of licensure and certification so that specific standards are upheld and maintained in the provision competent care to the patient. Another unique element to the health care profession is the degree of self-governance required in addition to regulations provided by state and federal regulators. If health service administrators fail to follow a code of ethics and maintain appropriate standards, they may be subjected to specific sanctions in the profession. Finally, in order to maintain the KSAs required by the health services administrative profession, lifelong learning is a commitment necessary to maintain a mature and positive professional identity.

**Professional Autonomy**
Another unique element to the health care professions is the ability to engage in critical thinking. Additionally, professionals appreciate the importance of intellectual property within a knowledge organization. Leaders value and support academic freedom and freedom of inquiry within the organization and attempt to cultivate among the other professionals an atmosphere and culture that generates new ideas and enthusiasm. At the same time, health care leaders respect and appreciate the KSAs of other professional disciplines and the need for self governance by the various professions.

**Interdisciplinary Practice**
As discussed earlier, health care organizations require the use of interdisciplinary teams. The heterogeneity of the professions within health organizations means that individuals must appreciate the skills, knowledge and abilities related to other disciplines. Implementing appropriate strategy and achieving objectives requires contributions from various disciplines empowering others, and encouraging professionals to work in health care teams. Inter-intra-extra professional actions and activities are extremely important in achieving specific outcomes especially in the area of evidenced-based medicine. Health care organizations need to reflect a cultural of collaboration and cooperation through interdisciplinary teamwork following a strategy to improve health care in the area of accessibility, cost and quality of care.

**Graduate Education**
Continuing post-graduate education is an excellent way to assist individuals with professional identity. Achievement of a masters’ degree in the field of health care management helps an individual acquire the KSAs needed to be a leader in a given discipline. Graduate and post-graduate degrees also assist individuals in advancement within their own professional societies. For example, the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) acknowledges individuals with graduate education to advance faster within ACHE than those without such education. Advanced educational training and extensive examinations are necessary to advance within the organization.
and obtain the status of a Certified Healthcare Executive (CHE). Individuals with graduate education have the necessary KSAs to prepare them for the written and oral examinations in the advancement process.

Benefits of Professional Associations

Establishing professional identity is important for key health care stakeholders. Maintaining affiliation and membership in recognized associations has several distinct benefits:

1. Professional healthcare associations provide up-to-date information regarding the key events in the field of health care management;
2. A professional code of conduct and ethical guidelines;
3. A body of knowledge;
4. Networking and mentorship;
5. Access to research and scientific literature.

All of these elements bring together the most current and dynamic trends that are occurring in the health care industry, giving the individual member of the organization the most up-to-date information and research to properly lead their organizations. Members of professional organizations also have an opportunity to submit articles for publication in association journals helping to contribute knowledge to the development of the profession.

Educational Programs

Through affiliation in a professional organization, several venues of continuing education are made available to members. These can be in the form of conferences, or specific topics targeting an individual’s interest within the professional organization. Educational programming is open to all members of the professional organization and members are usually given discounts to attend these seminars. It is also a requirement by the organization for executives to attain continuing education units or CEUs to continue membership; that is, in order for an individual to stay current in their field, they must continue to grow, learn and develop. Obviously self growth and development requires structured educational programs to enhance self-learning.

Networking

Networking allows members to develop relationships between individuals who share similar goals and interests. Professional organizations provide the ideal venue for executives and managers to meet each other and to facilitate the networking process. It is very important for professionals to share knowledge and experiences with other members, thus helping foster career development. Professional socialization allows individual members to form professional and personal relationships with other members of the organization and allows the professional society to continue to form a strong bond among its members. Mentorship and networking enables professional colleagues to seek guidance and support when encountering difficult issues in the profession.

Professional Code of Ethics / Value Systems

One of the substantial benefits of maintaining membership in a professional organization is that the members need to follow a professional code of ethics and value system within the discipline. Members of the organization have guidelines and ethical positions on ways in which the practice of medicine and health care management should be practiced on a daily basis. This value system can be incorporated into daily practice allowing a health care manager to develop a positive corporate culture. The code provides individuals with an accepted response and course of action to rely on when ethical questions and crises arise within the organization. More importantly, adherence to the code of ethics of the professional society ensures proper conduct in providing health care services to the community, patient, organization and other key stakeholder groups.

Career Assistance

In order for an association to benefit its members, it also must help them with career advancement. By developing opportunities for members to further their educational and career path, the professional organization becomes a vital link in career development and advancement. Services such as providing a listing of job opportunities in organizational publications, having career advancement
information on the internet, and setting up job assistance programs for individuals who are members of an organization assists members. Additionally, providing relevant and timely continuing education fosters career development vis-a-vis attaining certain levels of education within the field of health care management and insuring employers that executive maintain KSAs as a health care leader. Finally, networking opportunities lead to career advancement opportunities among professional members of the association.

**Credentialing**

ACHE offers a credentialing program for its members. Credentialing programs allow individuals to attain certain status, and advance within the professional organization. Credentialing processes also help to prevent skill decay. ACHE utilizes voluntary credentialing as a professional society whose mission is to increase effectiveness of health care management by providing high professional and ethical standards. ACHE has historically promoted the achievement and maintenance of administrative competence in the areas of health services administration. It does this through membership requirements which constitute a certification process involving education, examination, peer review, and adherence to ethical standards. In addition, there are three different levels of affiliation with the organization; Associate, Diplomate and Fellow status recognizing the advancement of health care executives through the certification process. The examination itself is periodically revised to reflect current policies and practices in the management of health care institutions, systems and delivery of health care services. The health care profession is an applied discipline. Credentialing gives individuals recognition by the professional organization and signifies to others in the field that individuals have the skills and leadership qualities necessary to lead an institution through the dynamic changes occurring in a high velocity health care environment.

**Opportunities for Leadership**

By being associated with the professional association, members will be given opportunities to participate in leadership situations where they can chair task forces, serve on committees, councils, and commissions on health care thus giving individuals valuable leadership experience that contributes to career advancement and leadership development.

**Legislative Representation**

Another important aspect within professional organizations is the ability to develop political interest groups, thus creating lobbying efforts on certain health care issues pertinent to health care leaders and the industry. The association gives members a voice in what can be a very intimidating political arena. The national association presents the issues to various legislative bodies allowing members the ability to continue to run their facility knowing that the issues important to their organization's survival are being addressed by the professional organization. One voice is typically not heard in the political arena, but the voice of thousands in the profession will be heard, thus assisting in facilitating political changes and public advocacy.

**Civic Mindedness**

Professional organizations help to develop future leaders - leaders who will benefit the community and society-a-large. This is an essential element in creating a professional identity by being a benefit to the community. Professional organizations assist in the reshaping of thinking, developing the ability to see the community as a whole, giving members perspective on how their organization can benefit their community, and further assisting providers of care in shaping the future of health in the community.

**Professional Organizations in the United States**

In the United States, professional organizations exist at local, regional, state, and national levels. Members of these organizations come from a wide spectrum of health care occupations. Examples of relevant professional organizations in the United States are the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), National Rehabilitation Association (NRA), the Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA), and the American Public Health Association (APHA), just to name a few.
ACHE has a mission to be the professional membership society for health care executives; to meet members' professional, educational, and leadership needs; to promote high ethical standards of conduct; and to advance health care management excellence. ACHE is an international society of more than thirty thousand (30,000) health care executives. The association is known for its prestigious credentialing and educational programs; members have the opportunity to participate actively in functions and activities at local, state, and national levels. The association is dedicated to helping individuals achieve professional goals in the field of health care management, maintaining standards of excellence, and achieving national certification.

MGMA is a national organization in the United States. It has a mission to improve health care administration in medical groups; provide leadership and lay activity directly involving medical groups; collect information concerning present and proposed national, state, and local legislation pertaining to all areas of medical group management; and to promote the education of members through meetings, seminars, and written communications. It offers members notice of upcoming educational sessions, discounts on the educational sessions, membership directory information to enhance networking opportunities, and newsletters to keep people informed. MGMA is in all 50 states of the United States and has a large and diverse membership.

NRAs mission is providing opportunities through knowledge and diversity for professionals in the field of physical medicine and rehabilitation. NRA has been active since the 1920s in assisting people with disabilities. It has continued to do that throughout its existence and has constantly supported legislation that assists individuals with disabilities. The association is a leading advocate of rehabilitation for disabled individuals and rehabilitation professionals, and has been instrumental in changing rehabilitation services and systems in the United States. As well as being an advocate for its membership, NRA provides its membership with continuing education, publications, and career development counseling to foster professional growth and development for its members.

The Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) is a not-for-profit association of university-based educational programs, faculty, practitioners and provider-organizations. AUPHA is dedicated to improving the field of health management and practice. AUPHA's membership also consists of more than 200 international administration programs and more than 100 affiliated health care organizations. AUPHA is an advocate for research in management and the organization and delivery of health services, and is involved with promoting graduate and undergraduate curriculum reforms and faculty development.

The American Public Health Association (APHA) has a collective membership in access of 50,000 members representing all disciplines and specialties in the public health spectrum. There are 24 special sections established along fields of discipline and special interest areas within the APHA organization. APHA provides a prestigious monthly journal with strong advocacy activities at the federal, state and local levels of government. Leadership opportunities include the ability to work on committees, holding office, conduct a seminar or workshop, and write papers for the professional journal. This organization is devoted to the protection and promotion of public health through setting standards to eliminate health problems, initiating projects designed to improve health, conducting research on health problems, launching public awareness campaigns, and publishing numerous materials reflecting the latest findings and developments in public health.

The Association for Health Services Research (AHSR) is the only national membership organization formed exclusively to promote the field of health services research and to strengthen the relationship between users and producers of research. A membership in AHSR is open to any individual or organization with an interest in health services research. This national organization attempts to promote and strengthen the field of health services research, increase public and private finding for health services research, influencing the development and implementation of public and private sector policies concerning research, disseminating health services research findings, and educating the public on the need for health services research.
Conclusion

Professional health services administrators must embrace the concept of community-oriented primary health care and recognize the need to improve the process of public policy on health issues. For health services administrators to become leaders, it is essential that appropriate education be attained and that leaders be able to assess their own strengths and weaknesses.

Every country engages in some type of process to improve health. The progress of medical science has generated expectations regarding the cost, quality and access to health care. Achieving and maintaining high levels of health in any population depends on solving problems, as well as understanding the importance of personal behavior, economic status, education, housing and other social factors that significantly affect health status. Leaders in health services administration must help communities utilize limited resources and guide efforts to reshape health care delivery in communities.

Health care has no national boundaries. The scope and accelerating pace of change in health and medical services provides health services administrators with an opportunity to demonstrate specific skills and abilities in achieving health service delivery system and service changes. Developing new paradigms and methods for delivering health care requires managerial competence and ongoing training. Of paramount importance in future of health services administration is acquiring and maintaining managerial competency and dynamic leadership. The complexity and rapidity of the changes in health care mandate purposeful preparation for a career in health services management. Formal professional education needs to be augmented with continuing education and strong affiliation with professional organizations who prepare people for a changing and dynamic industry.

References
კონფერენცია საერთაშორისო მედიცინური მეცნიერების სახელობით ისტორიის ოთხი წლის პირველ ამბროლიაში, რომელმაც მთავარი მეცნიერების არასათავისუფალი სიტუაცია გამოყოფა უნდა განიცადოს. მისი ფიქსირებული როლი და განთავსება შეიძლება ჩატარებული სამრეწველო პროგრამებში, რომლებიც არასათავისუფალი სიტუაციის შემთხვევაში გამოჩენილი იქნება.

კონფერენცია საერთაშორისო მედიცინური მეცნიერების სახელობით ისტორიის ოთხი წლის პირველ ამბროლიაში, რომელმაც მთავარი მეცნიერების არასათავისუფალი სიტუაცია გამოყოფა უნდა განიცადოს. მისი ფიქსირებული როლი და განთავსება შეიძლება ჩატარებული სამრეწველო პროგრამებში, რომლებიც არასათავისუფალი სიტუაციის შემთხვევაში გამოჩენილი იქნება.