

New to Management? Here's What You Need to Know

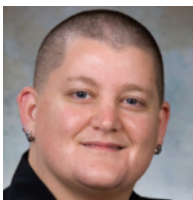
Michele DeMeo

Leadership is different than management. The skills necessary for successfully managing a technically based hospital unit are extensive and do not necessarily include technical knowledge. Many well-intentioned individuals are promoted into leadership positions because of their technical skills and experience, but have little or no business foundation to support them on their new career path. This article will not erase the knowledge gap for individuals who, from a business perspective, are initially unprepared to manage a sterile processing department (SPD), but it should reduce the gap by providing topics for consideration.

The size and type of organizational models used for SPDs vary greatly. Combine that with the fact that there's a slow evolution in recognizing such departments as major infection prevention centers, and you begin to understand the need for changing how they're managed and by whom. An SPD does not just store and dispense preprepared disposable supplies to other departments; it also processes invasive devices that have the potential to either support great patient care or cause great harm.

Recognizing the imperative nature of an SPD and its organizational reach is the first step in preparing the department for the role it has in a healthcare facility. The SPD is responsible for a host of functions within a healthcare center, from distributing manufactured disposable goods to cleaning direct-patient-care durable equipment to preparing and sterilizing reusable surgical instrument sets. These tasks are not simple and the methods are not standardized; consequently, the work that sterile processing technicians undertake each day is quite complex.

Because of this complexity, logic suggests that manag-



Michele DeMeo, CSPDT, CRCST, is the manager of the Sterile Processing Department at Memorial Hospital in York, PA, and an independent consultant. E-mail: MDeMeo@mhyork.org

ing this department is also complex. A sterile processing manager must have the ability to:

- Formulate budgets (operational, capital, and time-bound project work)
- Develop, execute, and maintain competency tools
- Understand standards and share this knowledge, using varying methods to ensure wide employee reach
- Understand and maintain compliance with regulations
- Understand and use appropriate coaching and counseling techniques
- Use appropriate software
- Develop and write policies and procedures
- Understand interdependencies and intradependencies
- Communicate well (e.g., have verbal skills and facility in handling "political" matters)
- Analyze data
- Forecast departmental needs and resources
- Strategize
- Conduct risk assessments to help mitigate risks
- Properly train and in-service technicians and other members of SPD

It's difficult to discuss in detail here all of the responsibilities for a sterile processing manager. But I can highlight key elements and discuss the steps that new managers or aspiring technicians should take to improve their basic skills beyond their technical experience.

Budgets

Operational, capital, and time-bound project work requires a solid and functional understanding of financing and how it applies to healthcare. In addition, specific applications must be grasped in order for a manager to successfully construct a budget, work within financial confines, and design project work from a funding perspective. At the very least, a manager needs to understand the basics: What parameters define a capital or operational budget at his or her specific facility? What are the differences between fixed and variable costs? What are unit

cost accounts? These are just a few of the many financial terms and considerations that a new manager must understand. If there is a knowledge deficit concerning these topics, what should a new manager do? Ask for help. Seek an appointment with a member of the healthcare facility's financial team and say, "I am new to this...Can you lend any advice or do you have resources I could review?" This simple step will help create an open working relationship with those who are intimately involved with SPD financial matters. It behooves the financial team to support a new member or a newly promoted manager. They need you to be successful and so does the facility.

Competency Tools

Developing, executing, and maintaining competency tools is also an essential skill that every manager must acquire. A technician's competence must be measured, and there must be something to compare it to; otherwise, it can't be evaluated. Competency tools—return demonstrations, tests, and other validated methods—represent one of the only ways that a manager can ensure that a particular employee is trained, has retained the information and skills, and can put those skills to work. Managers must comprehend the purpose of competency measurement and the available techniques. Help is available. For example, managers can reach out to peers who have more extensive management experience or gather information from associations such as the International Association of Healthcare Central Service Materiel Management (IAHCSMM).

Standards and Regulations

Standards set the bar for healthcare facilities and individual departments. Regulations are law. Both provide healthcare facilities and departments with a means to develop practices that mirror the latest in research and information. Understanding standards and regulations, and having the ability to share this knowledge are essential. Understanding and adhering to standards and regulations helps ensure appropriate levels of patient care.

Coaching and Counseling

Compliance with regulations and industry standards is a responsibility of every member of the department and facility. As a manager, this is where your human relations skills come into play. It can be difficult and challenging to oversee people. It requires compassion, empathy, and knowledge. A solid working understanding of appropri-

ate coaching and counseling techniques is the very core of the relationship between an employee and a manager. It is imperative that employees know whether they are being coached, counseled, or both. Coaching is an essential part of the relationship between managers and employees; it is sometimes less formal than counseling, involving softer, proactive approaches. Employees deserve the experience of working with a leader and the opportunity to grow professionally through mentoring and coaching. Counseling is a very precise procedure, and each facility usually has formal guidelines for managers to follow when it is required. Most counseling guidelines include at least the follow elements:

- Informing the staff member of the behavior that is not acceptable or identifying the area of performance that needs improvement
- Sharing expectations with the employee and detailing how and when to meet them for compliance
- Discussing candidly what the potential consequences of failing to meet the stated expectations and requirements

Most employees improve with coaching and counseling—but some will not. This is a hard lesson for new managers. It can be difficult to come to terms with, but it will probably happen at least once, if not several times, in a manager's career: An employee will perform poorly, despite your best intervention efforts. One of the most important human resources (HR) lessons a manager will learn is when to sever ties with a staff member who no longer serves the department or facility well. Following established policies and procedures and communicating with HR professionals to help you navigate these sometimes-sticky matters is important. In some cases, termination strengthens the department. Your team will not be blind to a problem employee, and they are waiting to see how you will handle the situation. Like any issue, people-related concerns must be managed well if the department is to function as optimally as possible. Your facility's customers and patients will reap the benefits of a department having only the most appropriate team members on board.

Software

In today's fast-paced workplace environments, appropriate experience with software is also essential. Managers need to be abreast of new programs and able to consistently use information technology (IT) systems to retrieve data and convey information. It is not acceptable in today's

world to develop practices or procedures on the basis of conjecture or impressions. Data are needed. Data development and analysis requires a host of skills, but it begins with knowing the facility's software and basic computer programs, and using them to gather information and share it in an appropriate manner.

Policies and Procedures

All managers must be able to develop and write policies and procedures. It takes skill and experience to draft something reflective of the department's actual practices and styled in a fashion that mirrors the facility's common language. It takes a solid understanding of the department's actual practices. It is not acceptable to simply copy a template. Yes, there is a structure to all policies and procedures, but that structure is merely a tool. For policies and procedures to be of any use at all, they need to demonstrate what the department or facility actually does—specifically, not generally. Managers must also challenge practices to verify that they are relevant. Practices must be checked to ensure that they meet regulations and standards before they are put on paper or changed.

Interdependencies and Intradependencies

Understanding interdependencies and intradependencies is one of the most important elements of managing a successful department. It is very hard, if not impossible, to deliver exceptional service if the staff fail to see how functions, tasks, and results overlap from one department to another and within the department. There are processes that either benefit or impede the work of other departments or staff. No hospital department is immune to the actions of other departments, and this is true of an SPD.

Communication

Good communication skills cannot be emphasized enough. Communication is both subtle and bold, and includes the spoken words, tone, and body language. All three of these characteristics of language help define the actual message and how others may perceive it. Communication involves handling “political” matters. Politics is part of the job of all managers and department heads. The more one progresses within an organization, the more important it becomes, and managing a sterile processing department is no exception. Like it or not, there is a place for it in business. In fact, some internal

politics are generated from the natural interdependencies and relationships between departments. The smallest of denominators can influence and affect the largest of functions for a department, division, system, or facility. Ensuring that the right people are included in the right ways helps to bridge seemingly disparate units to improve quality, facilitate efficiency, and, at the very least, reduce the potential for negative interactions between departments and between staff members within a department.

Analysis, Forecast, Risk Assessment

Analytical skills support a department head in many ways. The ability to forecast needs and resources is another important part of successfully managing an SPD or any department or division. If the manager can't strategize, the SPD may suffer. Conducting risk assessments helps managers focus concentration and effort in an organized manner. Without the ability to assess risk, it will be nearly impossible for a manager to mitigate risks in the future.

Training

Providing proper training and in-service instruction of technicians and other healthcare staff is a central role of a sterile processing manager. This is true even if a particular department has a specific sterile processing educator. The individual charged with leading the SPD must be able to relay information and techniques. The staff must be confident that the manager is capable in all aspects of running the department, including providing ongoing and consistent education.

Summary

Beginning a new career path has its challenges and risks. It is scary to take on a new role, especially if you feel that you may not be ready for it. Perhaps you felt a bit pressured into accepting the position. Maybe you were a bit overconfident of your skills and abilities. Maybe the sheer challenge of it spurred your decision. But there are ways to improve your chances of success. Reach out to peer managers, even those from a different field. We can all gain knowledge from individuals who have done it before. Seek information from your professional associations. Don't forget your local college; most offer career-development courses that can help fine-tune a technically savvy individual into a more prepared manager. It is never too late to seek help or coaching. The people you are leading expect the best from you, and you owe it to them to be the best that you are capable of being. ■