

Sometimes Being Good Isn't Good Enough

By Peter R. Kovacek, MSA, PT



ADVANCE
columnist

As a management consultant, I meet a lot of therapists in my travels. We really have a wonderful profession. Lots of people with great character and lots of characters, too.

One of the most difficult aspects of meeting so many of us is that sometimes you come across PTs who are very bright, very hard-working and very successful who, for some reason or another, make you sad. I had that happen to me recently.

I was doing a two-day workshop with a group of about 50 private practitioners in New England. The topic of the workshop was pretty typical for me—getting ready for managed care and helping staff face the challenges that managed care presents.

If you have followed the growth and impact of managed care at all, you are very aware that few areas of the country are being hit by managed care as hard as New England. Throughout the rest of the country, we are feeling crunched, but all we have experienced is a slowing of the rate of growth of health care—not an actual cut in spending. In the Northeast,

recent years have been a blood bath.

Looking Through Rose-Colored Glasses

The therapist that I am feeling sad about (I'll call him Ron) is about 15 years out of school. Ron owns a small practice and has developed a wonderful clientele in a very affluent area. He is a truly gifted clinician. As we were discussing the typical patterns in which markets change as managed care evolves in a community, we began to talk about the need to be very specific about the measurement of the impact of intervention. We spoke of patient satisfaction and functional outcomes. We also covered cost-containment and increasing clinical productivity. We consistently and repeatedly reviewed the critical role that quality measurement and continuous improvement must play in the evolving PT practice.

Throughout all of this discussion, Ron sat quietly and took some notes. When we were getting ready to take a break, Ron raised his hand and then spoke. He explained in very eloquent terms how he had worked very hard to develop his practice. He detailed how he is perceived as the finest therapist in the county. Then he said the part that makes me sad. He voiced his position that no one knew his service area as well as he did. He just knows that no matter what happens with this managed care beast, what he is currently doing will be successful.

Ron really felt that he had the answer to external intervention in our profession—find the best and just keep doing it. I admire Ron. He is the clinician I could probably never be. But I am sad for Ron. I told Ron two stories that I hope will help him in the future.

Reality Bites

I told Ron of watching students on affiliation who were confronted by a patient who did not understand English. At first, the students would speak to the patient just like all the other patients they had treated: they were very polite, very respectful and maybe even very clear and concise in their speech. However, no matter what they said, it just wasn't going to be understood. So the students said the same polite, respectful, clear and concise things again in English. Only this time they said it louder.

Then, I told Ron of my first job in therapy. I worked weekends at Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee while I went to Marquette University for PT school. My job was to bring down patients from the medical back unit for twice-a-day treatments in a Hubbard

tank. I would bring all 20 of them down in the morning and then again in the afternoon. The patients thought it was great. The referring physicians all considered the Hubbard tank to be crucial to the recovery of their patients with bad backs.

As I was telling Ron this story, he was smiling and even laughing at times. When I asked him why, he said that putting a back patient in a Hubbard tank is a big waste of time. Today, it just isn't done.

I relayed to Ron how we all felt when we started to figure out that insurance companies would no longer pay for this treatment. We all said that the insurance companies don't really care about the patients; they only want to make a buck. We said that the patients loved these treatments and for some of them, it was the only thing that seemed to help. We said that if anyone cared about quality patient care, we must fight to save these treatments—for the patients and the profession. It was so obvious to us how valuable they were. So we worked harder and fought the fight ... and lost.

For the students who shout in English to non-English speaking patients, for me and my band of Hubbard tank vigilantes, and for Ron who refuses to see his world changing, we all let our past success blind us to the need to recognize that the rules have changed. What worked before just wasn't going to work forever.

Our skills, no matter how wonderful, can and do blind us to future opportunities if we let them. To paraphrase Albert Einstein: "Be open to new ideas because the problems we will face in the future will require new thinking. We know this for certain because our future problems will have been caused by our current thinking. Remember that those things that you do that have led to your current success will most likely be exactly the same things that you will do that will lead to your future failures." ■

• For more information, contact the columnist via e-mail, Pkovacek@flash.net or see his Web site at www.theFOCUSgroup.net. For related discussion, join PT Manager list serv. To subscribe, send an empty message to ptmanager-subscribe@makelist.com.

Peter Kovacek is the president of Kovacek Management Services Inc. and a principal of The Focus Group Inc., companies that specialize in management consulting in rehabilitation services, in Harper Woods, MI.