

HealthLeaders

Cool Your Jets

Keeping emotions under control when C-suite tensions run high.
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When a system's operations begin to break down, senior leaders are expected to restore organizational stability as quickly and efficiently as possible. Sometimes, however, leaders find themselves on opposite sides of the fence when trying to find a solution. Such disagreement can exacerbate the problem and build tension among the group. The ever-changing nature of the healthcare industry breeds pressure and stress, and more often than not, an organization's executive body shoulders the burden. As a result, tensions may be amplified, causing leaders to redirect their anxieties toward each other, rather than focusing on the issue at hand.

Weigh your response

As the founder of the Cincinnati-based executive coaching firm The O'Brien Group, Michael O'Brien is accustomed to addressing boardroom turmoil. Failing to meet performance goals and resorting to personal attacks are the two main causes of disharmony among executives, O'Brien says. And one often results from the other. "Missing goals generates a lot of stress. The reaction to that stress is that people start attacking each other," says O'Brien.

Performance issues aren't always the stimulus for disagreement, however. O'Brien cites some cases when an executive's ill will toward a colleague generates hostility in the boardroom. "Given half the chance, someone can make something that doesn't have to be personal, personal," he explains.

Donna W. Hyland, chief operations officer of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, agrees that stress is an inescapable part of the C-suite environment, primarily as a result of the high level of responsibility executives bear. The importance of managing emotions can't be overemphasized. "Executives should respond, not react. They need to take a moment to consider what is being said and how they should respond," says Hyland. As COO of a 452-bed hospital, Hyland sees it as her duty to move discussions toward a solution or a next step. "Guidance and leadership from the COO and the CEO are crucial in making decisions happen, especially at the rate they need to be made," she explains.

Fear: The trust buster

Executives must become more aware of their emotional reactions and then learn ways to better manage them, says O'Brien, who at times has stopped a boardroom meeting to do on-the-spot intervening in order to address such issues. "When things melt down in the executive suite, it's because no one is leading anymore," he says. "Everybody is reacting--and in the most common emotional state--which is fear." Fear automatically puts people on the defensive. The inability to understand this innate mechanism can potentially control whoever is being consumed by it, O'Brien says. Those who don't know how to properly manage their fears often act out of self-interest to protect themselves. In doing so, they inadvertently step further away from those around them. This tendency weakens trust, which is a crucial element for a cohesive executive team to possess, O'Brien says.

Maintaining a calm, rational environment is essential for positive communication and building trust, Hyland says. A feeling of security enables executives to overcome difficult moments more comfortably because they trust one another, and they know that problems won't result in hostile finger pointing. "At Children's, we believe trust and respect are two of the most important elements of having a strong executive team," says Hyland. "Therefore, we strive to cultivate an environment based on these values."

Personality management

An easy assumption to make is that egocentrism on the part of some in the C-suite is at work whenever executives clash. Hyland, however, sees things differently. "Having strong personalities can be very beneficial to executive teams," she says. "But it is important to know individuals' personalities and character traits in order to harness those strengths." The most effective way to accomplish this, she says, is to build an environment based on mutual respect, where personality differences are embraced, not discouraged.

Refereeing disputes inside the C-suite shouldn't be in an executive's job description, says O'Brien, who encourages strong leadership through self-awareness--not dictatorship. "People must first and foremost recognize their own thoughts and behaviors," he says. "When executives can manage their reactions first, they're in a better position to then manage the reactions of others, as well." Although stress will never be entirely eliminated from boardrooms, O'Brien says executives need to avoid making situations worse by refusing to acknowledge the consequences certain reactions can have on the group. "The biggest danger is a lack of personal self-awareness--that's what gets most executives in trouble," he says.

—Matt Rogers