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T. T. Mitchell Consulting

Changing Attitudes and Perceptions for Unlimited Growth

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Issue 5

Greetings Friends,

This is another double issue; hope it proves educational.

Training and Evaluation

Many folks who become patient account directors come into the position at a major disadvantage. Being a patient accounting director means one of two things; either you've come up the ladder in your particular facility or you're what I call a mercenary, meaning you have car and will travel. In the first case, you may never have been given any management skills to help you become a leader of people. In the second, you come into the situation as the outsider, usually expected to create miracles immediately, and often don't have the time to evaluate your employees as well as you'd like to.

We don't have a chance to put our stamp on the departments we've inherited is when we hire someone new; a person without all the preconceived notions of what the department may have been, or still is. This is your one opportunity to try to mold someone into what you want them to be. Where we fail, though, is in two places:

- one, we don't often take enough time to make sure we put our stamp on that person's education, instead leaving it up to a team leader or supervisor or, heaven forbid -- a co-worker;
- two, we reach the end of the probationary period without knowing whether this person is what the department really needs and, if not, are reluctant to pull the plug.

Interviewing candidates is tough enough. However, once you've made your selection, you need to have a step by step approach, based on timed events, outlining what they should know in order to help you evaluate whether or not

you want to retain them after the probationary period. If you take some simple steps, it won't matter whether you have a hands on approach daily or once a month; you'll be able to make a pretty good assessment of your new employees and may even have something you can use for your existing employees.

The first step is to detail the types of information you want your billing employees to know. How to bill a claim isn't sufficient enough, yet most of us will stop there. For me, the first day spent with a new employee should involve educating them on the general terms they will hear on a daily basis. Of course these consist of all the different insurance types, as well as things like CPT-4, HCPCS, all the billing forms, modifiers, authorizations, co-pay,... you get the picture. I would have as many terms as I could on as many sheets as needed to give to each new employee. If you felt it would help your current employees, give them a copy also.

The second step is the evaluation of their computer skills. You certainly don't need to confirm their proficiency on the first day, but within a month you should have a definite feel as to your new employees computer comfort. Many people, even those who are used to PCs in today's world, are nervous the first couple of days while trying to get the hang of our processes. After that they usually start to take to the process. There's a lot of information to learn in the first month, and depending upon whether your office is alpha split or has billing groups dedicated to one insurance or another, the learning curve could take even longer.

After about 30 days you should have two tests. One test should be a vocabulary exam of sorts, based on the information you gave them on the first day. Without a full knowledge of what those terms are we all know our employees will never be able to do their jobs properly. The second test should be a quick test of the most used keystrokes that each employee needs to know. These obviously should include how to look up patient demographic and billing information, the notes screen, and anything else that your particular facility needs them to know. Part of the test should also include seeing how well your employee understands the information they're viewing on the screen. You don't have to initiate these tests yourself if you have a process in place, but you need to be informed of the test results. You should have a scale of what's acceptable, what's borderline, and what is considered a failing grade.

At three months, even though your employee may not know every single thing there is to learn, they should be pretty far ahead and self sufficient. At this point your evaluation tool needs to be a bit more detailed. Not only should it cover some of the same items as the first test but new criteria should be thrown into the mix, depending upon the job you have them doing.

For instance, if they handle any customer service phone calls you should be evaluating them on that. If you have them putting notes onto each account (we all talk the game, but very few of us ever really watch our employees to make sure they're following through) you should evaluate how they write their notes. Are they writing full complete notes that anyone can understand? Are they using a lot of shortcut terminology that you're unfamiliar with? Is what they're writing incomprehensible. If you have them writing letters to send out to patients you should be evaluating those letters, for content as well as grammar.

At the end of your normal probationary period, if your employee isn't up to the standards that you've set, you have to be ready to let them go. This is part of your responsibility as a manager, and as a professional. You must always remember that, as a director or manager, your name is on everything your employees do. There should never be a personal reason to do what's right for your department. If you've established an office environment where your teams, whether you have only one team or multiple billing teams, work together with each other, many times the new employee will have had a lot of input from their co-workers. Unless a person is totally disliked most employees like to help their co-workers. You, or your team leaders or supervisors, will know when someone isn't getting it, or isn't a cohesive part of the team.

If you're walking into a situation as a new manager or director, you may not have thought about this before, but you should set up the same criteria to help you evaluate the employees you currently have. You may not be in as clear a position as with a new employee when it comes to letting them go, but you definitely need to be clear on the skills of the personnel you've inherited. Many people can talk a good game, but like I said earlier, most of the time you're being brought in to fix a problem. If you're "cursed" to be walking into a perfectly good situation, it still doesn't eliminate your need to know just what it is you've got to work with.

I've written this as a very simplistic plan. The main points are that you need to have a plan for educating your new employee, evaluating your new employee, and following through on whatever the next step is supposed to be. I've given you the skeleton; it's up to you to provide the muscle and skin.

Illiteracy in the Workplace

I've been wondering lately what's up with today's employees when it comes to writing skills. Doesn't anyone know how to spell anymore? What ever happened to punctuation and capitalization? I would be hard pressed to find much nice to say about the educational system today based on some of the writing I've seen, but it would be disingenuous to the younger people to put out a belief that only the young seem illiterate.

When I was a patient accounting director, initially I used to allow my employees to write up their own letters to send out to patients. That is, until one day I got a look at one of the letters. Forget about them remembering anything as it pertains to formatting a letter, if they ever took typing in school. Do they still teach typing in school? I couldn't believe the poor sentence structure, let alone the choice of words used. If they were writing to their friends I wouldn't have cared so much. But when you're sending letters to your customers, the main message you want coming across is that you're a professional organization. No matter what the subject is, if the message being sent doesn't look correct your organization won't be taken seriously.

I also used to wonder why I never seemed to have enough qualified personnel to work in the cashiers area because most of the people who filed applications had almost no real math skills either. I know they still teach math in school, but I couldn't believe how many people seemed to have forgotten the basic addition and subtraction principles that most of us have been taught in second grade.

One truth I came upon is that it's not only your front line employees with terrible writing skills. I have met many management level employees who didn't know how to put two words together, let alone write an entire letter. Some of them have been blessed to have secretaries who studied the art and clean up all outgoing letters. But it's these examples that show it's not the intellect of the individuals which leads to their not understanding the basics of writing.

So, what are the reasons? I think there are four main reasons for bad writing. One, many people tend to write how they speak, and there's many of us who don't speak properly most of the time. Two, I don't believe grammar is as integral a part of the school curriculum as it may have been in the past. Not that they don't teach it, but the lessons aren't stressed as much as students move through grades beyond middle school. Three, the proliferation of chat rooms and instant messaging has created a new way of

writing, where more people use short little phrases and alpha-words (such as brb for "be right back") to communicate their thoughts quicker. And four, people either don't care to take the time to look at what they're writing or really don't have the time to review themselves before sending something out.

I'm not going to set myself up as being the perfect icon for how writing is supposed to look. I'm a product of my own time also, back in the days where we were taught that some words were pronounced exactly the same regardless of how they were spelled. I learned that, based on where you grew up, not all rules were the same in all places. Being a military child, I had it both ways. First, I had the luxury of learning the different regional rules of grammar. Next, I had to deal with the curse of having to quickly learn what was acceptable where I presently was. Confusion can reign when inundated with so many different styles and systems. Trust me; I've had enough people who've written me questioning how I said something in one of my newsletters from time to time.

The business world of today has to deal with this issue as much as dealing with the issue of reading skills. If you own a factory it's not so much of a problem. However, if you have some kind of business office where your personnel are expected to communicate with the masses it then becomes problematic. It's an even bigger deal if you're promoting personnel to management positions, where they're expected to be able to teach and educate others. Many companies leave the writing of departmental procedure manuals to management level employees. If they don't know how to write well, the message will not get across. If they're writing incoherent memos who's going to understand the company policy? If they're sending these letters out to your customers, why wouldn't you expect them to wonder just who they're dealing with?

Is it fair to give tests up front, either at the time of the job application or as part of the interview process? Not only is it appropriate, but it should be a criteria for certain jobs in every company. I can't think of one business in this country which couldn't benefit from at least one person who has some good writing skills. If your business has one or 50,000 employees, at least one of them has to know how to write a sentence.

Are there answers in how to address this issue as it pertains to companies today? Not many, unfortunately. There has been some talk that more large companies should invest their money into local school systems to not only teach job skills earlier but address some of the skills lacking in both writing and math. While there are some companies that actually participate in the process, the truth is that the costs seem prohibitive in today's economy, not to mention that there are no guarantees for the company that those they help will end up working for them as opposed to their competitors.

Some companies have training programs for basic academic skills, but not many. Estimates range from 1 to 8% of all companies that have such programs. Most of those companies, however, only allow those employees who they feel need the skills to do the job they're presently in properly to avail themselves of these programs. They ignore the facts that not only are there other employees throughout their company who might have higher aspirations and want to improve themselves, but also employees who may not be doing the same job tomorrow as they're doing today who may need these same skills.

I believe that every employee needs to constantly strive to be better. I believe that every employer needs to evaluate the needs of their employees and try to address them, especially if the skills missing are integral to the position. Good communications are the key for companies to not only get their message across to their employees, but to their customers. Such communications will never be effective unless both sides of the employee-employer relationship realize that it benefits everyone to not only have the provisions for improving writing skills, but to have the desire to make the attempt to use the skills learned.

T. T. Mitchell Consulting is dedicated to helping healthcare entities improve their financial base as it concerns receivables and revenue issues, including registration, billing, collections. Efforts are concentrated on the entire revenue process. T. T. Mitchell Consulting is also dedicated to helping facilities produce more effective employees. Concentration there is management and leadership, diversity and harassment issues, employee relations and customer service education, and group or individual coaching and counseling sessions are available. Offered are short term and long term programs, as well as group or individual coaching/mentoring programs to help all employees of an organization learn to work better with each other in an ever changing and diverse world. If you would like to view services provided by T. T. Mitchell Consulting please go to the website for more information: <http://www.ttmitchellconsulting.com>.

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