Management Matters

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ABSTRACT

Fewer than 50% of registered dietitians (RDs) supervise personnel and 76% have no budget authority. Because higher salaries are tied to increasing levels of authority and responsibility, RDs must seek management and leadership roles to enjoy the increased remuneration tied to such positions. Advanced-level practice in any area of dietetics demands powerful communication abilities, proficiency in budgeting and finance, comfort with technology, higher-order decision-making/problem-solving skills, and well-honed human resource management capabilities, all foundational to competent management practice. As RDs envision the future of the dietetics profession, practitioners must evaluate management competence in both hard and soft skills. Just as research is needed to support evidenced-based clinical practice, the same is needed to support management practice across the profession. Dietetics educators and preceptors should be as enthusiastic about management practice as they are clinical practice when educating and mentoring future professionals. Such encouragement and support can mean that new RDs and dietetic technicians, registered, will understand what it takes to advance to higher levels of responsibility, authority, and subsequent enhanced remuneration. In the ever-changing social, legal, ethical, political, economic, technological, and ecological environments of work, food and nutrition professionals who are willing to step forward and assume the risks and responsibilities of management also will share in the rewards, and propel the profession to new heights of recognition and respect.


"While 43% of all practicing RDs have some supervisory responsibility, only a quarter (24%) manage budgets" (1).

—Dick Rogers

A ccording to a recent Commission on Dietetic Registration study (1), clinical positions remain the primary setting for registered dietitians (RDs). Only 12% of all RDs are employed in food and nutrition management, whereas 55% are employed in inpatient, ambulatory, or long-term care clinical settings (1).

"We don’t get paid enough," is a complaint frequently voiced about the dietetics profession. When food and nutrition professionals shy away from budgetary and supervisory responsibilities, salaries suffer. Are RDs abdicating power to others outside the profession because of unwillingness to assume managerial authority and the responsibility that comes along with it?

WHY DOES MANAGEMENT MATTER?

The American Dietetic Association Phase 2 Future Practice and Education Task Force, in their draft report presented at the 2007 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo in Philadelphia, echoes the belief that management, indeed, does matter:

“The Task Force reiterates that management is a critical component across all advanced practice in dietetics. Advanced-level management is tied to salary levels in every area of dietetics practice. Higher salaries are commanded by advanced-level practitioners who assume the risk and rewards of high-level decision making and who manage a broad scope of resources” (2).

In other words, the greater the resources managed, including budgets and personnel, the higher the salary is likely to be. Managing budgets and personnel means doing the hard work of analysis and decision making. In the most recent Compensation and Benefits survey, Rogers (1) reported that supervision and budget authority are highly correlated with substantial increases in pay. It is the assumption of responsibility and risk that is scary, challenging, and yet lucrative.

Management is not all about being the stern taskmaster, the bean counter, or the adjudicator of decisions. Management and its alter ego, leadership (3), explain, in part, how food and nutrition professionals work effectively with and through people. Management is about how to think strategically, how to make sound decisions, and how to arrive at complex solutions to challenges that appear insurmountable—all to achieve the mission and goals of the business entity or the volunteer organization of which food and nutrition professionals are a part. As Paul Hawken said, “Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them” (4).

With all of the social networking advances made possible by technology, it seems that practitioners are losing critical soft skills like the ability to sit down and have a civil, frank conversation with someone face to face. In an
article by Kate Lorenz posted on CareerBuilder.com, the top 10 soft skills sought in today’s business environment include a strong work ethic, positive attitude, great communication skills, time management abilities, being a team player, possessing self-confidence, demonstrating the ability to accept and learn from criticism, flexibility/adaptability, and the ability to work well under pressure (5). How do RDs measure up on this top 10 list? Every one of these 10 skills is critical to managerial success. RDs need to develop these in ourselves, and, if we carry the title of manager, we need to develop these skills in employees. It has been said, “The conventional definition of management is getting work done through people, but real management is developing people through work” (6).

Management is one more tool that must be a part of the toolkit of every food and nutrition professional. Management principles transcend disciplines and practice areas. Management of resources—human, physical, and financial—is a core concept taught in the entry-level dietetics curriculum. Although often taught in conjunction with foodservice systems, these concepts are pertinent in any practice area. The same management principles apply whether one is directing a school foodservice operation, a staff of clinical dietitians, a multimillion dollar research grant, or a Fortune 100 company.

Management matters in all facets of the social, political, educational, and economic environments. According to Mintzberg (7), “The manager determines whether our social institutions will serve us well or whether they will squander our talents and resources.” The fundamental management skills that for years have been inherent in the education of entry-level food and nutrition professionals are the same management concepts taught in general business courses and outlined in many of the great books on management (8-10). More advanced management skills are needed as food and nutrition professionals climb the administrative ranks.

The Phase 2 Task Force outlined a common core of competencies required of all advanced-level food and nutrition. Advanced-level practitioners need to demonstrate high-level skills in communications, information technology, finance and budgeting, leadership, management principles, marketing, human resource development/management, and organizational development/administration (2). These skills begin to be developed during supervised practice as a dietetics student or intern, and practitioners must continue to hone these skills throughout their careers.

Management skills are integral to success in an increasingly complex dietetics profession. These remarks are meant to evoke dialogue among professionals in an attempt to change the negative reactions that often surface when management is mentioned. Management and leadership are a balancing act—distinct yet complementary (3). If RDs are to become major change agents, we must step up and step forward to be leaders in the food and nutrition arena. This means taking responsibility for tough and sometimes risky decisions. The principles that make for success or failure in day-to-day operations are severely put to the test in extreme, risky, or emergency situations. As revealed regularly in the media, crisis situations turn the spotlight on leaders, revealing the best and the worst about their planning, organizing, directing, staffing, and controlling abilities. On the other hand, how many of us can identify crisis situations in which the management skills of RDs have come to the rescue? The successes of such individuals should be recognized, celebrated, and emulated.

We hope that readers of this article will look at issues facing the world, understand the potential effect on the profession, and learn from those who solve complex problems. The dietetics profession is trying to keep pace with changes in the workforce, organizational restructuring, issues with the safety of the food supply, plummeting financial support for higher education, never-ending technological developments, the health care crisis . . . the list goes on and on. If ever there was a time for food and nutrition professionals to demonstrate leadership and management competencies, it is now.

HOW CAN THE VALUE OF MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN THE DIETETICS PROFESSION BE SHOWCASED?

Science is the foundation of our profession (11), and this includes management science. RDs need to conduct research in the area of management practice. Practitioners need to inundate both peer-reviewed and lay literature with articles focusing on management theory and practice. Educators and preceptors need to create as much enthusiasm for management as for clinical practice when educating students. Cluskey, Gerald, and Gregoire (12) tout the domino effect of a more positive perception of management earlier in a career.

HOW CAN FOOD AND NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS CONTINUOUSLY HONE THEIR MANAGEMENT SKILLS?

Be Well-Read

Read the latest management and leadership books, peer-reviewed business articles, or trade journals. Grasp the issues of the day and the challenges for the future.

Peruse the Occupational Information Network Resource Center and O*Net Online

O*Net (http://online.onetcenter.org) can be searched for comprehensive occupation information, including key attributes and characteristics of occupations (Figure). With the educational background, knowledge, and skills of RDs, the titles chief executive officer, chairperson of the board, and president are within our grasp. RDs with this set of management skills can land these roles. For each job family, occupation, and/or discipline, O*Net has a listing of job titles, tasks, knowledge, skills, ability, work styles, interests, and more. Read the descriptors carefully. Practitioners could use these data to develop their own skills and to mentor staff. Likewise, dietetics faculty can use these to develop their own management skills, revamp the dietetics management curriculum, and develop continuing education for practitioners.

Participate in Organizations that Develop Management Skills

Join Toastmasters, Rotary, Kiwanis, or any of the host of civic or philanthropic organizations. Such networks can give RDs a forum to become involved, practice public speaking, or lead committees that are not work-related.
Network with Leaders and Managers Outside the Profession

Learn from others who are facing similar challenges and achieving successes outside the world of dietetics. Wheatley (13) dares her readers to sit next to someone they have never met and strike up a conversation. Incredible opportunities can come from seemingly random and casual conversations.

Attend to the Soft Skills

Being the boss requires balancing hard and soft skills. When given the option between technical and soft skills training, managers often choose the former because the latter is not well understood or valued (14). Yet the soft skills are the most often desired when hiring new talent. Hard skills can be taught. Soft skills must develop within and be nurtured in our personal and professional lives.

“Management’s job is to see the company, not as it is . . . but as it can become” (15). RDs must take the long view to become true change agents for food and nutrition issues in our world. Management must matter.

References