

Management Matters

Rebecca A. Gould, PhD, RD and Deborah Canter, PhD, RD

Rebecca Gould is a professor and director, Information Technology Assistance Center, and Deborah Canter is a professor and head, Department of Hotel, Restaurant, Institution Management, and Dietetics, Kansas State University, Manhattan.

Address correspondence to: Rebecca A. Gould, PhD, RD, Information Technology Assistance Center, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506. E-mail: ragou@k-state.edu

This paper was published as: Rebecca A. Gould and Deborah Canter (2008). *Management matters*. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 108(11): 1834-1836.

ABSTRACT

Less than 50% of dietetics professionals supervise personnel and 76% have no budgetary authority. Because higher salaries are tied to increasing levels of authority and responsibility, dietitians 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 registered dietitians 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, dietetics 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.

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

Introduction

In a recent Commission on Dietetic Registration study, clinical positions remain the primary setting for registered dietitians (RDs). Only twelve percent of all RDs were employed in food and nutrition management while 55% were 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 dietetics professionals shy away from budgetary and supervisory responsibilities, salaries suffer. Are registered dietitians 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 ADA Phase 2 Future Practice and Education Task Force, in their draft report presented at 2007 Food and Nutrition Conference and Exhibition 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 & 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, however, 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 dietetics 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 dietitians 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 with

CareerBuilder.com, the top ten “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 registered dietitians measure up on this top ten 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 which must be a part of the toolkit of every dietetics 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. While 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 multi-million 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 which for years have been inherent in the education of entry-level dietetics 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 dietetics professionals climb the administrative ranks.

The Phase 2 Task Force outlined a common core of competencies required of all advanced-level dietetics practitioners. 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). While beginning to develop these skills in supervised practice as a dietetics student or intern, 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 which often surface when “management” is mentioned.

Management and leadership are a balancing act--distinct yet complementary (3). If registered dietitians 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 crises

situations where the management skills of dietitians have come to the rescue? The successes of such individuals should be recognized, celebrated and emulated.

It is hoped that readers of this article will look at issues facing the world, understand the potential impact 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 re-structuring, issues with the safety of the food supply, plummeting financial support for higher education, never-ending technological developments, the healthcare crisis....the list goes on and on. If ever there was a time for dietetics 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 the 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 dietetic 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 for comprehensive occupation information including key attributes and characteristics of occupations (Figure 1). With the educational background, knowledge and skills of RDs, the titles of the *chief executive officer, chairperson of the board, and president* are within our grasp. Dietitians with this cadre of management skills can land these roles. For each job family, occupation and/or discipline, there is 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 (13).

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 of dietetics. Learn from others who are facing similar challenges and achieving successes outside the world of dietetics. Wheatley (14) 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 the 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 (15). 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” (16). RDs must take the long-view to become true change agents for food and nutrition issues in our world. Management must matter.

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