

The Physician Executive

From Physician Leader to Corporate Physician

EDDIE ERLANDSON, MD

Five years ago I assessed and enhanced my patients' vascular health. Today, I assess and improve the corporate health of departments, divisions, and whole organizations.

My "patient exams" now take the form of in-depth leadership competency interviews called 360s, that involve an executive's peers, managers, and teams.

"Patient consultations" look like one-on-one feedback and coaching that often involves prescriptions for telling the truth, learning on the run and becoming accountable.

I used to write articles on clearing arteries.

Now they're about clearing the sludge that brings our organizations to a halt.

Instead of conferences with families, I hold offsite teambuilding sessions that help boards and executives support one another and act in concert to achieve their financial goals and deliver value to their costumers.

And sometimes I even talk about healthy lifestyles, but mostly my speeches involved the entire array of radical changes we must each make to achieve the results organizations need now. Some of these radical changes include instantly becoming curious any time we hear criticism and dropping any behaviors that resemble victims, rescuers or persecutors.

CHANGING CAREERS

The path from there to here started eight years ago, when I noticed how hard it was to create change at my own medical center. There was no question that the system needed to change, in terms of economic outcomes as well as disease management, prevention and health.

When I co-designed and taught Life Lessons, a 16-week wellness program, I received significant push-

back from some physicians because it included mind/body practices like meditation and yoga. One physician even remarked that next we'd be teaching Communism!

After two years, the 300 people who completed this program showed significant improvements in quality of life, overall health and endurance, plus reduced cholesterol, blood pressure, and weight.

One day, an executive who participated in Life Lessons commented that he knew his health and well-being had improved and that he would live longer. He got my full attention with his final comment: "I'm also applying this at work and our bottom line is up 25 percent this quarter."

Our institutions and our patients all suffer from the same disease: resisting change. I became increasingly aware of the phenomenon of sludge: a mixture of protectiveness, pleasing, paternalism and independence that gums up the works and stops any real progress in its tracks.

Sludge emerges in all typical health care scenarios, like competing for resources, turf battles, customer responsiveness, innovative information systems, and practitioner engagement.

And it's endemic to corporate America as well. Wellness requires exercise and muscle building, and the antidote to organizational sludge is a different set of muscle-building exercises that burn through to higher, creative solutions.

Preventing the build-up of sludge in our health care systems and corporate world is exactly parallel to clearing it in our vascular systems. As I taught patients how to identify and manage stress by understanding its physiology and impact, I realized that communication and conflict resolution were the most common issues.

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I began to develop my own skills in these areas, taking workshops from the Institution and Medical Leadership Group through Kaiser Institute (www.kaiser.net) and also from the Hendricks Institute (www.Hendricks.com). The radical changes in my perspective and approach yielded several results:

- I broke a lifelong pattern of conflict between my obligations to patients and my physician executive role by making the conscious decision that I was putting in enough time for both and could be effective at both. Amazingly, the criticism stopped from both sides and I became happier and more effective all around.
- After listening to administrators complain about the clinicians and the clinicians complain about the administrators, I stopped and asked myself how I was helping to create this. I realized that I had the tendency to want to keep everyone happy. Each side thought I agreed with them and I had no idea of my real opinion. I changed my strategy and began speaking candidly to both. Both sides stopped carping and complaining and I had a lot more energy at the end of the day. We also got some solutions we hadn't reached before.
- I also altered the framework of medical executive committee meetings. For each issue, we went around the table three times: First to give our views, second to acknowledge how we were keeping the issue going, and third, to identify the step each person was willing to take to resolve the situation. We moved through numerous agenda items more quickly and had time for more discussion at the end. We all felt more engaged.

In 1999, I heard Kate Ludeman, PhD, author of *The Corporate Mystic*, speak about her work with the executive teams of Dell and other top executives. She was bringing candor, accountability and authenticity into the business world, just as I was doing in the health care profession. Here was a kindred spirit!

Two years later, I joined her firm to bring the skills and processes used with corporate execs to health care executives. We help leaders to grow instead of staying stuck in the same old patterns and build stronger teams using techniques that deliver measurable bottom-line results. Although I've only been in the role for about a year, I experienced a number of dramatic executive headlines:

- A sales executive with a Forbes 150 global services company increased this year's first quarter sales in a depressed market by 55 percent. Her sales rose by 400 percent over the fourth quarter 2002, when she began to tell the whole truth to customers, peers and her managers.
- A physician exec in a Colorado surgery group whose "aha moment" gave him a whole new lease on life and work. He felt so weighed down by challenges with junior partners that he thought about retiring. When he realized the one behavior he needed to change, he went back to work with renewed energy and new choices.
- An admiral who stopped a meeting and acknowledged he was acting defensively. This dramatically freed up dialog, discussion and opinions, resulting in a leap in creative solutions for his team.

I feel delighted in my new role of helping create the changes that make business healthier and the health care industry get down to business and heal itself.

Contact info@worthethic.com or refer to www.worthethic.com for more information.



Eddie Erlandson, MD, is a Senior Vice President at Worth Ethic Corporation and a former hospital Chief of Staff and vascular surgeon. He delivers keynote talks, coaches executives on leadership, and facilitates hospital mergers. He is the co-author with Kate Ludeman of *Radical Change, Radical Results: 7 Actions to Become the Force for Change in Your Organization*.



4690-B Carpinteria Ave.
Carpinteria, CA 93013
805-745-1210 • info@worthethic.com
www.worthethic.com