

**From “*Them*” to “*Us*”:
*Going Where Others Have Gone Before***

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To Mary Gallagher, the hospital's new CEO, the growing need for physicians and administrators to work together to solve the challenges before them seemed obvious. Physicians agreed, but little progress had occurred. Recessionary government budgets and employer pushback through reduced benefits and increased co-payments seemed ominous. Medical malpractice premiums were spiraling upwards, pharmaceutical costs were escalating, and the percentage of health care insurance premiums going to medical claims was decreasing. The basis for competition was shifting from managed care contracting to quality, demanding further financial investments (e.g., computer technology). Faced with rising costs and lower reimbursements, medical staff physicians were searching for new revenue sources. For example, rumors about two new surgery centers were worrisome, given their likely impact on previously profitable hospital revenues. Old patterns of "us" versus "them" relations made collaboration appear unlikely. At the recent hospital/medical staff/board retreat, little progress was made in developing enthusiasm for a common vision as the foundation for addressing needed changes. And yet going it alone as a hospital no longer seemed viable. Mary wondered what she could learn from others who had faced similar challenges.

Major changes, by definition, threaten our fundamental beliefs about who we are (e.g., we are physicians who provide high-quality care), how we should behave (e.g., as senior administrators we must protect the financial foundation of health care in our community), and how others should behave toward us (e.g., they should recognize that we know how to deliver quality care). Given the threat to such beliefs, it is not surprising that most people do not voluntarily initiate major changes in their own thinking or behavior. Nor are most people enthusiastic about behavior changes pressed upon them by others.

If they won't change on their own and we can't easily impose lasting change on them, how can we ever break out of our current pattern of opposing each other on every issue? How can we learn to work together for mutual well-being and the good of our community?

Others have successfully navigated this path from distrust of "them" to confidence in "us." What can we learn from them?

A Wall Street Example

General Electric's transportation system division had a long history of below average financial results and was a distant second to General Motors in locomotive engine market share. Poorly-timed investments in facilities during a deep recession further threatened the future of the division.¹ In response, division leaders eliminated 40 percent of the blue-collar workers and cut overtime possibilities for those who remained, thereby demonstrating that workers were apparently dispensable. Heated worker resistance in the form of slowdowns resulted in a series of shipment delays that spiraled into even further financial deterioration. The employees felt a threat to their very existence – who they understood themselves to be – and showed little interest in collaborating for the success of management-led changes. GE management, rather than General Motors, was the enemy from their perspective.

Even under such conditions, some initial overlap of the interests of workers (“us”) and management (“them”) often exists. Such an overlap in the transportation division allowed a subset of workers and managers to identify mutually-valued projects for action. For example, management began sharing organizational information and asking for input about how to correct problems in assembly operations. Eventually one welder put himself at risk with his peers by providing valuable information, leading management to reorganize the workflow, share the benefits, and create a win-win situation for workers and management.

From this modest beginning, new management-employee relations began to emerge. Workers, now seen in a more positive light, were given information about market share, income, future orders, and what this all meant to them in terms of their jobs. Management began to recognize them for jobs well done. After a series of expanding successes, both management and labor began to see each other and themselves differently. They also developed a new understanding of the need to work together to serve customers, and began to recognize General Motors, not each other, as the enemy.

Is This Relevant To Health Care?

How might Mary Gallagher, the hospital CEO in our initial example, use this approach to enhance physician-administrator relationships? The pattern in the GE example of moving from small wins, to enhanced relations, to larger wins and positive organizational outcomes, has been observed across diverse settings in which mutually interdependent groups have moved from distrust and opposition to mutual respect and collaboration². So others have already gone before on this path from “*them*” to “*us*” and can show the way.

The questions in Figure 1 are based on the experiences of others who have already successfully gone down this path. They allow you to evaluate the degree to which you have taken the steps for generating a foundation for trust and collaboration. We suggest collecting candid, untraceable information from different perspectives (e.g., physicians and administrators).

Figure 1 Characteristics of the Path From “Them” To “Us”

Please describe your organization’s collaboration-building strategies. Indicate how frequently each statement is true on a scale ranging from Never (1) to Always (5).

We support physician-administrator collaboration by:

- A. Openly communicating that we cannot achieve our dreams without building collaborative relations _____
- B. Exhibiting behaviors that clearly communicate our recognition of the need and desire to partner with **“them”** _____
- C. Openly sharing never-before revealed candid information with **“them”** _____
- D. Taking potentially risky actions to contribute value to **“them”** _____
- E. Identifying and proposing mutually-valued projects for action _____
- F. Sharing the benefits of early wins from mutual actions with **“them”** _____
- G. Regularly recognizing **“them”** publicly for jobs well done _____
- H. Openly communicating new ways of seeing our relationship with **“them”** based on our successes together _____

How does your organization look with regard to this list of winning practices? Any score below 3 demands serious consideration, if not action. Have you created initial trust-building projects? Have you publicly communicated through words and behaviors the need to partner with **“them”**? Have you openly shared information, proposed mutually-beneficial projects, and shared the benefits of early wins with those whom you want and need as your partners? What changes might be helpful as you strive to move forward collaboratively together? How will you build the solid foundation required to make these needed transitions?

Why should Mary, the CEO described at the beginning of this article, take the first steps in shifting perceptions from “*them*” to “*us*”? Through her eyes, “*they*” are likely the problem and should therefore take the first steps. Waiting for others to change their behavior is a long and frustrating process, however, and those who wait put themselves in a powerless position of victimhood. Leadership requires seeing possibilities and taking the steps to move toward those dreams. The sooner Mary follows the path leading from “*them*” to “*us*” that others have already taken, the sooner the benefits will flow to all involved.

¹ Tichy, N. M., & Sherman, S. 1993. ***Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will***. New York: Currency Doubleday.

² O’Connor, E. J. & Fiol, C. M. (2002). When hot and cold collide: Riding the spirals of emotions and logic. ***The Physician Executive***. November-December, 28, 18-21.