Cross-Functional Teams: Collaborate and Listen

By Julie Pursley Dooling, MSHI, RHIA, CHDA, FAHIMA

Technology is often blamed for our troubles and challenges working with healthcare data. However, human interaction and poor communication is really where the problems begin.

The cornerstone of effective communication is successful data and information governance within healthcare's cross-functional teams. Cross-functional teams are commonplace in organizations today. They represent a collaborative team approach and are crucial for executing in this fast-paced and ever-changing work environment. This cooperation begins with solid communication and a foundation of accountability within core teams, and can spread across a variety of cross-functional teams working on cross-functional projects.

Recognized Need for Skill Sets

The expanded need for allied healthcare professionals to have a diverse skill set continues to trend throughout the healthcare industry. Angie Fergen, RHIA, CHPS, manager, identity services, Epic security coordinator at Saint Luke's Health System (Saint Luke's), based in Kansas City, MO, recognized this need long ago when she was forming her team of information technology and health information management (HIM) professionals.

"It takes someone who is well-rounded in healthcare, but also detail-oriented to get into the weeds and analyze what needs to be done," Fergen says. Fergen and her colleague, Sharon Korzdorfer, MPA, RHIT, director of HIM at Saint Luke's, strive for a strong communication connection between their teams.

"Our best practices from the HIM side include weekly meetings with our HIM program manager. This allows us to stay in sync on the number of projects, testing outcomes, ensuring there are enough resources on both sides to handle changes and updates, and learning what our staff are seeing on the operational side of things," Korzdorfer says. "This constant communication, even if it's just a quick 30-minute chat, helps tremendously to manage and predict outcomes."

Rapidly Changing Environments

While these professionals have a strong communication foundation, there are many situations where lines can quickly become blurred due to a rapidly shifting environment. For instance, when a merger or acquisition takes place between organizations, project timelines can be fast tracked. When the deal is being crafted and negotiations are underway, organizational leadership is usually not well positioned to share information.

Once the deal is inked, cross-functional teams jump into action. The project managers can instantly inherit another layer of complexity when working on and planning projects with new or unfamiliar individuals and teams. These cross-functional teams are directed to cooperate and collaborate on multiple cross-functional projects that have very tight deadlines, creating the potential for a stressful and confusing work environment.

In an article in *Harvard Business Review*, the author notes that "teams often fail because the organization lacks a systemic approach. Teams are hurt by unclear governance, by a lack of accountability, by goals that lack specificity, and by organizations' failure to prioritize the success of cross-functional projects."[1]

Pre-Defined Approach and Expectations

The need for a pre-defined approach for the creation and management of cross-functional teams is clear. A formal reporting and accountability structure should be implemented and enforced—and be supported by all levels of management and leadership.

Careful initial selection of individuals and teams that will represent their areas on a certain project is crucial to success. Members may change through the lifecycle of the project, therefore converting selection and replacement into an iterative process. This continuous attention to those who are participating and interacting should focus on overall inclusiveness, collaboration, efficiency promotion, cost containment, and meeting of deadlines.

For individuals participating in these cross-functional groups, the expectation of personal accountability includes active listening, staying positive while collaborating, and demonstrating a high degree of respect for everyone's individual roles. A meeting to discuss the scope of work for a project should always include the owners and users of all the applications and/or systems involved. Time and resources are always a challenge. Not addressing these challenges up front could create milestone delays and scope creep, leading to non-budgeted costs in order to complete the project.

Bridging the gap through collaboration is highly important in a team environment. For example, sharing one's knowledge of the data lifecycle from an operational and technical viewpoint can help bridge gaps in cross-functional teams. Discussing how the data is created, captured, used, processed, managed, and ultimately maintained from these varying viewpoints can enhance communications and build team trust. Creating data and information definitions is one way teams can positively collaborate.

This can also help avoid general misunderstanding or misinterpretation of certain terminology. Terminology can take on different meanings depending upon the brand or product being discussed. Each electronic health record (EHR) has its own unique "speak" or "talk track." For example, "speak" and "talk track" are slang terms used by EHR sales and technology developers. Users of particular EHRs may have their own unique terminology specific to the vendor or module. For instance, KND refers to "known non duplicate" for users of Epic systems. The use of common definitions and tools such as a matrix can help a team set and form a base for positive and productive communication.

Steps should be taken to ensure that cross-functional teams are well-organized, high-functioning, and supported by leadership in a manner that provides proper governance for successful cross-functional team performance.

Note

1. Tabrizi, Behnam. "75% of Cross-Functional Teams Are Dysfunctional." *Harvard Business Review*. June 23, 2015. https://hbr.org/2015/06/75-of-cross-functional-teams-are-dysfunctional.

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