Have you ever thought “Why doesn’t administration see the value in infection prevention and be more supportive?” This is a comment heard time and time again from fellow infection preventionists (IPs), yet I wonder if we are asking the wrong question. Instead of complaining about the situation or expecting it to spontaneously change, perhaps it is time to “adjust the sails” and take a different approach. To gain the support that we all need, a better question might be, “What can I do to help senior leadership achieve their goals?” This shift in perspective can be empowering, permitting the IP to be an active participant in the process instead of a passive spectator.

**JUST WHAT DOES ‘SUPPORT’ MEAN?**

Purposefully cultivating executive champions can provide immense benefits to an infection prevention program. However, it is worth thinking about those benefits more broadly. We often define “support” in very narrow terms that are synonymous with financial and human resources. This restrictive...
“Resource constraints are on the mind of every executive, and we all have to find ways to improve our care while simultaneously driving down the costs. Sometimes that means advocating for technologic solutions that will enable more efficient use of the existing infection prevention resources.” —Dr. Amy Imm

criterion misses the true value that executive support can provide; executives can be advocates for infection prevention when we are unable to sit at the table (tangible or proverbial).

An engaged executive champion can articulate the value and worth of an effective infection prevention program to other executive leaders and provide support of initiatives during physician interaction. Executive champions can weave examples of infection prevention successes into high-level discussions with board members or other decision makers. In short, building a strong relationship with executives can help keep a positive light focused on infection prevention.

**TAKING A BROADER VIEW**

Just as you have a strategy and an action plan to improve hand hygiene rates or decrease surgical site infections, the same planning should be used to build and strengthen the relationship with executive leaders. Creating and improving your relationship with key, influential executives should be a strategic priority. To begin this process, step out of your role for a moment and imagine the hospital operation through the eyes of the executive. This broader view will provide the opportunity to consider the changing landscape of healthcare and the competing demands that executives face daily. Healthcare in general is changing from a volume- to a value-driven model. Increased mandates for transparency in performance is also a driver in today’s healthcare environment.

**Step 1:** Work to understand the evolving issues that create the agenda for healthcare executives. This will provide the framework for the next step in cultivating executive champions and support for the infection prevention program. This is where strategic planning skills come into play. You use these on an informal basis every time you take on a project to improve a process or an infection rate. Leverage those skills when creating your executive champion strategy.

**Step 2:** Construct a list of executives in your facility and utilize the information gained from your broad perspective thinking in the previous step.

**Step 3:** Outline one or two key points that could be expected to be a focus for that person. For example, the CEO is likely concerned about the potential for lost revenue due to the ongoing healthcare reform, while the executive in charge of quality and/or patient safety might be focused on publicly reportable metrics and increasing performance on value-based purchasing measures.

**Step 4:** Now is the time to engage that new perspective and outline how infection prevention can help to drive success in each of the identified focus areas. You know the value of an effective infection prevention program. The goal is to share that in a targeted approach that will demonstrate value to the specific executive.

**Step 5:** Once you have outlined a framework, it is important to use the correct approach when setting up the meetings. Make it clear that the purpose is to discuss their goals and priorities and determine how you can help with reaching those achievements. Presenting the purpose of the meeting in this light will immediately create a positive atmosphere and is likely a refreshing change for that executive.

It is important to keep the focus of this meeting on aligning the benefits of the infection prevention program with the priorities of the executive. Remember the goal is to learn what is important to that executive and discover ways that the infection prevention program can provide solutions.

**Step 6:** Now that you understand the goals and priorities of the executive, use the program plan and your knowledge about current and future projects and map those to the goals. This provides a concrete example of how you can assist with successfully meeting goals. It also provides a natural focus for future communication topics with executive leadership.

**ONGOING COMMUNICATION AND STORY-TELLING**

After setting the initial groundwork, ongoing communication that demonstrates benefits to that executive is key. Did a patient comment to you during rounds that they feel safer knowing there is a focus on preventing infections? Do you have a success story of how a physician changed their practice after a conversation? You might think of these examples as routine occurrences not worth mentioning. However, these little nuggets are actually gems that can be valuable additions to an executive’s toolkit.

While data, statistics, graphs, and tables are a large part of our daily work, stories have amazing power to engage people. Those stories that shine a light on the value of infection prevention provide a powerful resource that executives can draw upon during interactions with board members, physicians, and fellow executives.

The key is to provide the information to the executive in a way that is most meaningful and valuable to them. Don’t get stuck in thinking that data has to be presented in a specific format. The most scientifically, mathematically accurate data...
“As an executive, it is important that I have brief talking points on relevant infection prevention subjects at my fingertips. Stories about patients are always easy to remember and can create a compelling case for why infection prevention work is important. Data in the form of executive summaries also helps me to provide other executive and physician leaders with just-in-time information.”

—Dr. Amy Imm

is worthless if your audience doesn’t understand or use the information. One-page executive summaries outlining current state, successes, and barriers might be exactly what senior leadership need to draw focus on a project during an executive team meeting. Incorporate discussion regarding the preferred way to provide information as part of your executive engagement strategy.

INCREASED EXECUTIVE SUPPORT = STRONGER INFECTION PREVENTION PROGRAM

Fostering executive champions and building relationships with senior leaders should be a top strategic priority for every IP. Taking the approach of how can you partner to successfully meet

goals and priorities intrinsically demonstrates the worth of infection prevention. Demonstrating solid value while building goodwill is an effective tactic to create executive champions.

Purposefully strengthening and improving relationships between infection prevention and senior leaders can have far reaching impact on the success of your program. Those executive champions will not only be armed with success stories and a clear understanding of the value of infection prevention, but more importantly, they will communicate it at venues when you are not present. Taking the time and effort to continually strengthen your relationship with executive leaders will provide invaluable returns on that investment in the form of a greater understanding as well as that long awaited and much deserved support for the infection prevention program.

“Building relationships with my infection preventionists is one of my priorities. They are critical members of our quality improvement teams, and working closely with them helps me to ensure our work is aligned with the overall strategy of the organization.”

—Dr. Amy Imm

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References