

Defeating the Survivor Syndrome

A few years ago, while working as a regional manager covering about 24 programs in 8 different states, someone not in our industry asked me what working in the air medical business was like. Well, to say the least, he caught me on a bad day. I said it was a lot like a bad episode of Survivor, the popular reality TV show so many people enjoy watching. You have a couple dozen class-A personalities thrust together who are constantly trying to vote each other off the island while, at the same time, relentlessly taking sides and conspiring against one another, all while looking for an immunity idol—that precious piece of dirt on someone else that will ultimately keep them from getting voted off the island.

Like I said, he caught me on a very bad day. In all honesty the majority of the programs across the country that I have had the pleasure of working with are great and have a sound just-culture rooted in fairness and common sense. It is the diversity and, yes, the class-A personalities that make up our industry that attracted many of us to get involved in the first place. But, that being said, there always seems to be that 10% who just flat drive you insane with the constant high drama that I have come to call Survivor Syndrome.

Anyone who has been in this industry for more than 24 hours has likely heard such phrases as, “Well, you know, I heard it through the grapevine that...,” “You won’t believe what I just heard about the night team...,” “We were flying last night and the pilot...,” “I don’t want to get anyone in trouble, but...,” “I can’t talk to them, they’re not approachable about...,” and on and on.

Creating and sustaining a just-culture that encourages direct communication with one another that, in turn, allows us to repeatedly achieve quality results can be one of the biggest challenges we face as an industry. Ask yourself the following question and you will have an idea if your organization has a just-culture or may be suffering from the Survivor Syndrome: When 2 team members are

upset with one another, to whom do they go? If the answer is anything other than each other, then your program probably has a problem. All too often the answer is the boss, human resources, or that person’s boss or even the CEO. If it’s anything other than the team member they’re upset with, then the culture at your program is headed into the dangerous waters of the Survivor Syndrome.

Leaders, supervisors, and team members need to ensure that everyone is both encouraged and allowed to address each other directly, especially when they are upset, aggravated, disillusioned, etc. That being said, the conversations that take place need to be positive. Human nature being what it is, when the message is distasteful or difficult, we would all rather have someone else deliver it for us. Professionalism is a learned skill, as is hearing criticism about ourselves. It does not come easy, but it must take place for us to mature.

As supervisors and leaders, we must also be very careful that the chain of command we create does not become a roadblock to good communication. There must be a basic belief and understanding that it is OK and expected for people to speak directly with one another, especially when the subject matter may be tough to discuss. An organizational chart should never be used as a shield for someone to hide behind, and while open door policies are good, they can be a double-edged sword that some use to further their own agenda. The manifestation of an “us vs. them” mentality can often be a direct result of a well-meaning organization chart that separates job specialties into individualized columns on a piece of paper. This in turn has been known to create silos, which people then become accustomed to and don’t or won’t venture beyond. An individual’s character and integrity should be what defines him or her, not his or her specialty.

I have personally wasted literally hundreds of hours having people talk to everyone other than the person they really

should be talking to in the first place, the person they were upset with or had issue with. One of the traps we all must be on guard against is becoming enablers of Survivor Syndrome and being a pawn to further someone else's agenda. This is not to say we shouldn't be prepared to help and be involved, but the best way I have found to help is to be a mediator, with all parties sitting at the table at the same time to discuss the issues. This ensures that there is less of a chance for multiple alliances and drama to take root.

One particular case got so bad that I shut down an entire base for half a day just so everyone was literally seated at the same table at the same time to hash out their issues and concerns. When everyone had to talk face to face with one another and no one could hide behind someone else, it was amazing how much misinformation was brought to light from a few individuals who pulled the entire organization into the Survivor Syndrome game. This passive/aggressive behavior of a select few can act like a cancer that eats away at a program's very core, killing its morale from the inside out.

The first question we should ask when confronted with someone who is embroiled in conflict with another is, "Have you discussed this with the other person directly?" If not, ask them to do that first. If they do not get the resolution or satisfaction they were looking for, sit down with both parties and discuss the issue. Understand this

isn't easy for most people to do, but you have to encourage people to solve their own conflicts, which allows them to improve their own communication skills and keeps Survivor Syndrome in check.

If you have never provided training in conflict resolution, basic team building, or communication skills, I highly recommended it. It can go a long way in helping to stop Survivor Syndrome from finding its way into your program. I learned the hard way early on that conflict is not like a fine wine—it does not get better with age. You must meet it head-on and quickly, because the longer you avoid difficult situations or frank discussions, the more you allow a bad situation to get worse.

A just-culture, both from a program and an industry standpoint, encourages and teaches people to communicate with each other directly and not to rely on others to carry their messages for them. A play on the famous quote, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day, but teach a man to fish and he can feed himself for life" would be "Carry a man's message for him and you fix his problem for a day, but teach him to deliver his own message and he will learn to communicate for a lifetime." Poor communication is the root of all that is evil in any organization or industry. Don't allow Survivor Syndrome to get a foothold at your program.

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