

PRESS RELEASE



For immediate release: Thursday, 26th November 2009

BEWARE PITFALLS OF 'AUTHORITY GRADIENTS', WARNS MDDUS.

Employing an autocratic leadership style in healthcare management in which staff are wary of questioning decisions by doctors or dentists can sometimes lead to disaster, warns an article in the first edition of a new magazine for practice managers published by MDDUS.

The article in *Practice Manager* magazine stresses that when relationships are under pressure, communication is one of the first things to suffer. It points out that communication failure is the highest-ranked contributor to risk, safety failures and significant adverse events.

Risk training consultant Phil Higton, the author of the article, says that creating an environment in which 'difficult' conversations can be made less threatening and more productive does not happen by chance – all the team have to play their part.

Higton, a former pilot now with the training firm Terema, uses the term 'authority gradient' -- commonly heard in aviation circles -- to describe the relationship between junior and senior team members.

Higton says: "If the gradient between them is steep, the boss will have a tight grip on proceedings and can appear decisive. But the down-side is that juniors may feel they are merely 'units of labour' and therefore be reluctant to communicate or contribute observation and insights. Over time the juniors may lose the capacity to think for themselves."

The article says that shallow authority gradients also have drawbacks. "Giving every team member licence to comment over every matter can slow decision-making or stop it altogether. Responsibility may become blurred."

Higton says that in the world of general or dental practice, partners are likely to have a bias towards steep gradients. But he adds that over time, both the will and ability of more junior staff to make decisions, even in administrative matters, is eroded.

"Taking decisions locally requires competence and confidence. Appropriate training can deliver competence but confidence can be reinforced or shattered by the working relationships.

"The safety risk is increased if the decision-maker becomes overloaded. Communicating effectively when the workload is high is critical to safety, but creating the appropriate environment and developing the necessary skills has to be undertaken before the workload increases."

In terms of managing the authority gradient, Higton says seniors should invite juniors to speak up with their concerns, and juniors must make those contributions clearly and professionally.

He concludes: "Agreeing a small, appropriate group of phrases to be used whenever high workload or high risk is recognised is important.

"If anyone, particularly someone under pressure, has to interpret the nuances of what is said, a significant risk to safety is introduced. A professional language with agreed phrases is powerful in addressing this."

The new *Practice Manager* magazine has been launched by MDDUS to offer an informative and interesting resource to help professionals manage their medical or dental practice.

Aileen Wilson, editor, says: "In *Practice Manager*, MDDUS brings together a broad range of issues including medico- and dento-legal advice, employment law and statutory and regulatory issues.

"There will also be plenty of interesting and entertaining features offering a perspective on some of the hot topics in practice management today."

Ends

For further information contact Colin Calder on 0141 616 2677 or 07850 510881.

Note to editors

MDDUS is a medical and dental defence organisation providing access to professional indemnity and expert medico- and dento-legal advice for doctors, dentists and other healthcare professionals throughout the UK. For further information on MDDUS go to www.mddus.com.