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Meet the New Boss

Some years ago, the rock group The Who immortalized the line “Meet the new boss...same as the old boss.”¹ Originally, these words symbolized the disappointment of a generation seeking but not finding large-scale change. Now, however, the prospect of no change is comforting to LuAnn, a seasoned vice president in a large health system on the West Coast.

Like many health care leaders, LuAnn is facing undefined, but certain, future budget constraints as her organization prepares for health care reform. She also has another challenge: her chief executive officer (CEO) is leaving. The current CEO brought her aboard, and he has championed her many successes during her 15-year tenure.

LuAnn is a nurse in her mid-50s. She anticipates working at least another decade; she loves her work, and she had planned to retire from her current position. Those around her would agree that she has thrived as steward of an organizational function that has enjoyed enthusiastic support from the CEO, but tepid interest from other senior leaders.

LuAnn’s nursing background infuses her with a genuine passion for her work, and she relishes her team’s contribution to the well-being of patients and their families. Through both qualitative data and anecdotal experiences, LuAnn knows that her department makes a significant difference in the community.

Like many of us, LuAnn has her share of personal concerns, particularly as she and her family recover from recent economic calamities. Still, she maintains a good deal of tangible success and is clear about how she does it: through hard work, a strong belief in her own values and those of the organization, her unwavering attention to the priorities of senior leadership, and her commitment to creating outstanding results that can be measured through both numbers and stories.

Now, LuAnn’s organization is grappling with challenges that she believes will directly affect her position. In addition to having a potentially smaller or nonexistent budget and a new but unknown CEO, the organization recently shifted LuAnn’s reporting relationship away from the retiring CEO. She now reports to an individual

that does not share her passion for the work. In fact, her new boss may want to eliminate LuAnn’s entire function, thereby achieving considerable cost savings for the organization.

Understandably, LuAnn is concerned that she might soon be out of a job. Actually, she is more than concerned; she is afraid. She admits that she has had many sleepless nights since she learned that the CEO was going to depart.

If you were LuAnn, how would you cope with your fear and uncertainty? How would you handle your concerns while still providing strong leadership for your department?

Let’s look at what LuAnn actually did in these circumstances. To manage her anxiety and maintain her effectiveness, she employed five distinct strategies. She became conscious and intentional about selecting the strategy or strategies that would best serve her in specific situations.

1. She engaged a trusted advisor and discussed her feelings about all the changes that were occurring on her job. She also talked with friends, family, and some colleagues. She did not isolate herself, nor did she overexpose her feelings with inappropriate audiences. Her circle of trusted individuals helped her determine whether her fears were real and whether her predictions were likely to happen. Her openness and their input helped LuAnn focus on likely scenarios rather than potential but far-fetched possibilities.
2. She also reflected on the worst: the loss of her job. She considered the impact upon herself and her family. She developed an interim plan that addressed their short-term needs but also created a viable bridge to long-term financial survival.
3. She thought about what she would really *like* to do if the unthinkable occurred. The first time she pondered this bleak prospect, she couldn’t think of anything else she wanted to do. As time went on, however, her spirits lifted as she realized that even if the work were organized differently, she could still do what she most loves to do, perhaps even inside her current organization. She also began to appreciate that other organizations would value her skills and experience, too. She developed a list of those places and pre-

pared to research them if needed. The essence of this strategy is significant: *LuAnn decoupled herself from the form and structure of her current work and instead focused on her passions, the content, the impact, and importance of the work itself (versus its departmental home or her title).*

4. With her trusted advisors, LuAnn discussed upcoming meetings in which the future of “her” services would be considered. She worked on being clear about her role, her voice, and the position she would take in each of these meetings. At times, she concentrated on a particular high-stakes meeting’s agenda and its attendees. She developed a meeting-specific approach to deploying her knowledge of her function, its benefits, and/or her point of view about her department’s reason for being. In other words, she clarified whether she wanted to speak as an educator about the department or an advocate for its services or both. She sought feedback on her communication approach and style and the likely impact she would have. She was mindful of her role as a champion for the health system as a whole, not just her individual function. In every case, she made choices about how she wanted to present herself. She reminded herself to deal with her fear of losing her job *outside* the meetings so she would not be overcome with emotion *during* them.
5. In some cases, she literally practiced what she would say in stressful conversations in the larger management circle. Sometimes she asked others to role play so she could run through her comments. Rehearsing allowed LuAnn to anticipate actual discussions, hear her own voice, and become more comfortable with potential conflict and challenges to her work or livelihood.

LuAnn’s story illustrates that even without her champion CEO, she could sustain herself during seriously challenging times. She worked hard to manage her fear and the uncomfortable ambiguity in her life. She prepared for likely eventualities as she shifted reporting relationships and as her organization got ready for a new CEO and healthcare reform. She developed plans for the loss of her job, and she rehearsed important meetings. Equally significant, she became clear that her ultimate goal while in this position was to continue to be a respected member of the team, even if her own function was threatened.

In the end, LuAnn’s history of excellence and these five strategies served her well. The new CEO arrived and, eventually, her department and her position were eliminated. Throughout the process, LuAnn held her own. Others in the organization saw her as a valuable contributor even in the most onerous personal circumstances.

LuAnn was asked to stay in the organization. She now enjoys a new job that she helped to create and she still earns a competitive salary. She fuels her passion and uses her expertise every day, and she reports that she could not be happier with how she managed the process and the results she created for herself.

Yes, the individual who occupies the role of our boss certainly does matter, whether the new boss is the same as the old or not. But the individual who is reporting to the boss matters even more. LuAnn illustrates what can happen if

we face our fears and we are honest about how real they are. When we practice being our best and plan for the worst, we can survive and prosper, no matter what outside forces have in store.

Reference

1. Townsend P. Won’t get fooled again. On: *Who’s Next*. Decca Records. 1971.

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