



A Change of Heart

Set Goals to Improve Your Team's Sharps Safety

by Ron Stoker

Well, look, it is already April... So how many of you have lived up to your New Year's resolutions? Many people approach the New Year with renewed enthusiasm and optimism. I find that it is important for me to take stock of where I am in life and make plans to change myself for the future. Maybe you do the same. Many people put together a list of New Year's resolutions such as lose weight, start an exercise program, read more books—but by January 12th most of us had already ordered pizza twice, haven't broken a sweat, and haven't pulled ourselves away from the television. Does this sound familiar to you?

For most of us, an assessment of our personal lives is very close to where we are at with our professional lives as well. Have you taken time to assess where you are in relationship to protecting the healthcare of your colleagues and co-workers? Have you taken time each day, week, month and year to make and keep goals?

The comedienne Lily Tomlin once said, "I always wanted to be somebody. I guess I should've been more specific." If we don't like what we are becoming, we need to make some changes in our professional lives. We can't just sit around waiting for things to change in

a positive direction—we have to take the initiative and do something bold. Jules Renard, a French novelist, wrote: "He who waits for roast duck to fly into mouth must wait a very, very long time."

Change does not happen automatically. I have often told my children, "If you look at your past, then that is your future, unless you make some changes and put some energy into the system." Most of us need to put some energy into the system to make meaningful changes. For most of us this means that we need to have a change of heart.

Change of Heart

Twenty-six years ago as a graduate student at the University of Utah Bioengineering Department, I studied how plasma fibronectin, a blood protein, adsorbed onto various types of plastics. Others in my laboratory were working on similar projects. This research was beneficial in gathering information that led up to the implantation of an artificial heart into a human being.

Within two years, in 1982, Dr. Barney Clark, a retired dentist, became part of modern medical history. He agreed to have a total artificial heart implanted into his chest to replace his ailing heart. Although he knew

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that he would not live long with the artificial heart, he decided to have it implanted in order to help save other lives in the future.

The Jarvik 7 heart, named after its inventor, Dr. Robert K. Jarvik, was made of polyurethane plastic and aluminum. It was implanted in Dr. Clark's chest at the University of Utah Medical Center on December 2, 1982. Dr. Clark was a medical pioneer and a volunteer to receive a permanent artificial heart, and it was fortunate that he volunteered. By the time Dr. William DeVries had opened Dr. Clark's chest and hooked him up to the heart-lung machine, his human heart had stopped and became useless—he would have died immediately. Without the Jarvik 7 artificial heart, Dr. Clark would have died on the operating table. With the artificial heart Dr. Clark lived for an additional 112 days.

If we are not accomplishing our goals at our facilities, maybe we need to have a change of heart in how we do things, to look at things from a fresh perspective and with renewed enthusiasm and vigor. Sometimes we need to breathe new life into our professional lives. We need to sit down as a group and challenge ourselves to improve. One area to look at would be our compliance with the Bloodborne Pathogen Standard. We need to be bold and really have a change of heart about how we look at sharps safety and reducing bloodborne pathogen exposures.

We should consider doing some or all of the following:

List the goals that you have for the rest of the year. Make sure that you have plans to review your sharps management program. This should include looking at replacing all sharps with safety products. If this is not possible in every case make sure that personnel protective equipment plays a role.

Establish a culture of safety in our facility. Most change does not occur unless senior management exhibits the commitment to adopting safety as one of their top priorities. They need to not only tell people that change must happen, but they need to be exhibiting compelling evidence that change must be made now.

Encourage all employees to dress for success. Are they wearing the appropriate protective gear and equipment? Do they know how to use the appropriate safety equipment?

Have an active safety committee. Are meetings scheduled on a regular basis and are they well-attended? Are the agendas of these committees filled with goals and performance expectations presented on at least an annual basis?

Train new employees on safety procedures and on the consequences for ignoring safety practices or engaging in unsafe behavior. Are the consequences for ignoring safety practices enforced?

► **Make sure that you keep score.**

Do you know how many needlestick injuries that you had two years ago, how many last year and how many this year? Do you know how many sharps safety products that you have evaluated and implemented? Make sure that you keep track of these things. Yes, keeping track of these items is required under the Bloodborne Pathogen Standard—but they also help us to see how we are doing. Unless you keep score when you play golf you have no idea if you are improving or not. The same is true of your evaluations. Keep score and let your team know how you are doing. Just knowing that you are winning and ahead of your plan will help your people have high morale. And if you are “losing” in your goals, you can know what needs to be done to improve morale and win.

► **Celebrate improvements.**

Make sure that your team looks for improvement in your sharps safety programs and report them—no matter how small. When improvement is rewarded your department will be more likely to get additional improvements. This in turn creates a successful environment and improves morale. Part of celebrating improvements means that you have to keep people informed. When people are informed on how the team is doing, they are more likely to be motivated to do their part.

► **Give appropriate feedback.**

If we do not give feedback on how an individual or department is doing on their sharps safety goals, then it is often difficult to meet our goals. It is important that individuals receive frequent feedback because it will reinforce the behaviors you want repeated.

By following the steps outlined above, managers can unite their department, building morale that will rally to achieve the goals they have set forth. The team will begin to have a fresh perspective and passion. The purpose of setting goals and providing feedback helps all of us to challenge the status quo. Have a change of heart—put some energy into the system, and you will be rewarded with meaningful changes in the safety of your team. ✦

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