

The Evolving Role of the Program Coordinator: Five Essential Skills for the Coordinator Toolbox

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As ACGME (Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education) requirements have expanded and become increasingly more complex, so has the role of the program coordinator. Over the last decade, the knowledge and skills required to capably administer residency and fellowship training programs have increased in both volume and complexity. Today's coordinators are responsible for more than clerical tasks. They also function as managers and have greater roles in the development and implementation of program initiatives, policies, and outcomes. As a result, coordinators' roles and responsibilities have evolved to include management skills. To keep pace with the rapid and continuing change, it is imperative that coordinators continue to develop these skill sets to add value to their programs, institutions, and careers.

Key Words: Program coordinator; program manager; program management; change agent; manage up; quality improvement; data analyst; data analysis; professional development; GME; ACGME; AUR; APCR.

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Since 1999, when the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and the American Board of Medical Specialties established the six core competencies as the rubric for graduate medical education (GME) training, the requirements for the administration of residency and fellowship programs have snowballed. Increasing demands on the program director to be a clinician, educator, curriculum developer, mentor, compliance manager, and training director have, consequently, opened the door to new opportunities for the profession of the program coordinator. We have had to assume some of the burden from our program directors whose primary responsibility remains patient care. Our role has evolved from a coordinator of tasks and resources to a manager of people, policies, and outcomes. Our responsibilities have transformed to include skills traditionally associated with management. We must not only keep pace but also develop new skills to master rapid and continuing change. It is imperative that we, as program coordinators, embrace continual learning and develop new skill sets that add value to our programs, institutions, and careers.

What are the new skills needed to be an effective program coordinator today? To transform from coordinator to manager?

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In this article, we discuss the five new skill sets we believe are now necessary for our profession: managing change, managing up, utilizing quality improvement methodologies, analyzing data, and developing professionally.

Note: Because it is the currently accepted term used by the ACGME, this article uses the term program coordinator to refer to program coordinators, managers, and administrators (1).

MANAGING CHANGE

Change management is necessary for program development. Advocating for change, influencing others, working strategically to build support and consensus, and planning for implementation originate from a change manager, also known as a change agent. A change agent does not single-handedly enact transformation but rather creates the environment for change, coordinates the process, and leads the charge. A change agent looks down the road to see what is coming, identifies long-term challenges and potential opportunities, and anticipates changes that should be implemented to meet future needs. As the best-laid plans do not always anticipate all variables, the change agent must be flexible and demonstrate the ability to reconsider and revise goals. As program coordinators, we are well suited to this task because of the intimate knowledge of our programs, tenures that bridge program directors, and full-time commitment to program administration.

This skill set is not limited to program directors, department chairpersons, and institute leadership; it should be developed and utilized by program coordinators as well. By embracing the need for this skill set and integrating its objectives into our workday, we will add value to our programs

and institutions. Thomson et al. (2) articulate the need for change management, “In an era of great upheaval and great uncertainty in the future direction for the US healthcare system. . . change management skills and transformational leadership will be ingredients of successful performance in the academic medical center today and in the near future.”

The competing demands of clinical responsibilities, academic pursuits, and training program leadership leave program directors with little time, energy, or willingness to develop management skills. This provides an opportunity for program coordinators to contribute beyond day-to-day program administration to long-term management, planning, and implementation.

Author JS shares an example. With the evolution of the Interventional Radiology/Diagnostic Radiology (IR/DR) residencies and the elimination of the IR fellowships, the Cedars-Sinai radiology program saw an opportunity to increase program competitiveness. With no current IR fellowship, the program did not anticipate developing either an integrated or an independent IR residency. However, the program recognized that the very absence of IR residents and fellows could be a great asset in the development of an Early Specialization in Interventional Radiology (ESIR) curriculum. Because the DR residents are the sole trainees during each block, there is no competition for cases, and the substantial volume and breadth of cases affords residents the unique opportunity to work one-on-one with faculty. In this case, the author, as change agent, drove the process as follows: (a) by educating the program leadership about the upcoming changes to IR/DR residencies, including the ESIR pathway; (b) by building consensus among the stakeholders; (c) by confirming appropriate buy-in and approvals; and (d) by developing a plan to complete the application process.

A program’s ability to manage a changing environment and a program coordinator’s skill to effect change will help programs evolve and meet the demands of radiology GME in the future.

MANAGING UP

The idea of managing up is not a new one. Gabarro and Kotter wrote the seminal article “Managing your Boss” in 1980, and its recommendations resonate today as much as they did then (3). The evolution of the program coordinator position makes the skill of managing up an important addition to our toolbox. Increasing responsibilities in personnel and project management, in policy and procedure administration and enforcement, and accountability to high-level stakeholders have expanded the support services that we provide.

Managing up can be easily misinterpreted and misapplied. It is *not* fawning over our supervisors or program directors. It is *not* circumventing the routes of management to get what we want. It is “being the most effective employee you can be, creating value for your boss and your company” (4). To repeat, we need to maximize our effectiveness to our program

directors and stakeholders to add value to them, our programs, and our institutions.

Why does a program coordinator today need to master this skill? Because so many individuals, committees, departments, and organizations depend on us to do the job accurately, efficiently, and judiciously. Residents and fellows, program directors, the GME department, the Designated Institute Official, the ACGME, and the American Board of Radiology and the American Board of Nuclear Medicine have always depended on our services. Now, our stakeholders also include the following: associate program directors, the Program Evaluation Committee, the Clinical Competency Committee, and the Vice Chair of Education, in addition to our own expanding network of colleagues and professional organizations. Managing up is an essential skill whether we are supporting an individual or a committee, but this section will examine its use in the director-coordinator relationship.

The crux of managing up is “to cultivate a productive working relationship. . . by understanding your boss’s strengths and weaknesses, priorities, and work style” (3). The only way to do this is through honest, open communication. By communicating to each other—director and coordinator—what you are and are not good at, your work style, values, and goals, you will be able “to develop and manage a healthy working relationship—one that is compatible with both people’s work styles and assets, is characterized by mutual expectations, and meets the most critical needs of the other person” (3).

The importance of understanding our program directors’ goals cannot be underestimated because those goals are our goals. Most program directors do not explicitly state what their goals and expectations are, so it is our responsibility to take the initiative. Set up a time, so the program director has time to prepare, to discuss what immediate and future short-term and long-term expectations are for the program and for program coordinator performance. This is also a chance to voice whether or not, based on opinion and experience, the goals are reasonable. It is important to follow up with a memo and send it to the program director to review and approve. This memo will ensure that both the director and the coordinator understand the common goals for the program.

During this meeting, discuss work style. How does the program director want to receive information? Is the program director a “reader” or a “listener”? Drucker explains that “readers” prefer to read information initially so that they can study it whereas “listeners” prefer to hear information first so that they can ask questions (5). Does the program director prefer to be involved in all decisions or only major decisions? How much authority will you as program coordinator have to make independent decisions?

Our program directors’ time is as limited as our own so be conscientious and discerning about appeals for time, attention, and efforts. Over the past decade, the program coordinator’s role has expanded dramatically due to increasing administrative requirements on us and increasing clinical demands placed on program directors. Program directors are physicians first and have limited time for deep learning of the

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