



CHOICES

BY PATRICIA KROKEN, FACMPE, FRBMA, CRA

Where we are right now represents the culmination of choices we have made up until this point. This is not to diminish the impact of those sometimes devastating events beyond our control, but to recognize that it is how we chose to deal with those events once they occurred that shaped our lives. The same challenges that forge strength, character, and leadership in some individuals will send others cowering into a corner—or perhaps out of a profession entirely. It is interesting that our lives are shaped not only by those pivotal major choices, but also in the small patterns of choices we face every day in our lives and careers.

At some point you made the choice to work on the business side of radiology. Some people probably did so because they heard the income was good, some because it was a job that was open when they were looking, and some because it offered career mobility. But no doubt for everyone, it seemed like an interesting choice at the time. Ironically, as a marketing person I went into radiology because I wouldn't have to travel as much as I was when working for a regional food company. It is ironic because I have spent the past 14 years traveling two or three weeks of the month. It also looked interesting (one of my relentless mind's criteria for staying more than two years in any one position without looking for something new to experience). I have never been bored in radiology—not even for an afternoon.

So let's look at some of the major choices we face in our noble profession.

Attitude

We work in a profession where the business environment is largely out of our control and, on many levels, almost nonsensical. And it's getting worse, as those who do not work in healthcare try to “fix” things for those who do. We are at the mercy of the physicians who must send us patients, the hospitals where we provide services, the insurance companies who seem to pay based on arbitrary rates and equally arbitrary rules for determining what is payable. We have generational gaps and varying priorities among our employees, and at least one with marginal competence and an over inflated sense of entitlement. Based on the typical hierarchy of a radiology practice, we also work for multiple highly intelligent and frequently opinionated bosses who have virtually no understanding of our jobs.

Are you a victim of these circumstances? Are you railing in frustration and lamenting the fact that you have to do so many things that seem so very stupid? And that nobody knows (or cares) about the problems you face? And that no matter what you do to attain a level of control over your environment, someone else seems to be working overtime to muck it up?

That's called job security—at least to the degree that there will be a challenging, frustrating, unending-stack-of-stuff-to-do job in radiology. Can you handle it, bucko? You get to decide. You can choose victim or you can choose student, warrior, puzzle-solver, “practicing without a license” psychologist, arbitrator, negotiator or interpreter—and sometimes all of those in the same day! Granted,

you need a few checkpoints:

1. There was obviously nobody from radiology at the table when the group of idealists sat down to make new laws—and we have lots of “committee” results to contend with. This is stupid, but if you insist....
2. My life is a test; what does not kill me makes me stronger; if I can get through this I can get through almost anything (add other reassuring motivational quotes here.)
3. Now *that's* interesting.
4. If this crisis was happening to someone else, would I think it was funny? This is valuable in situations such as preparing for the conference call with the labor board regarding the manager you fired for viewing porn on the company computers when he thought he'd deleted everything (but didn't) and said it was because you didn't like him—and you're uncomfortably assembling documentation. (It happened.)

I have chosen to be an optimistic radiology warrior (with no apology to the flower-wielding “can't we just group hug instead” ranks of my colleagues). I am an optimist to the degree that I think I can actually make a difference. Each day I arrive with my well-planned task list and greet the chaos that is my career. I work quickly in spite of a myriad of interruptions by people and events determined to derail my progress. They are usually successful to some degree, but as a warrior I continue on just to annoy them. I dismiss the absurdity of Medicare regulations while attempting gallantly to understand how someone with a college education and this much experience can struggle with the inept instructions for filling out the new and improved series of 855 forms. Exhausted but not beaten, I end the day by battling a soul-draining 45 minutes of rush hour traffic—or airport screening and a packed flight, depending on the day.

Are there bad days? Absolutely, especially if you just found out someone made a big billing error and you get to report on a monthly revenue dip at the next board meeting. There are days I am so beaten I want to run away to become a waitress in a small mountain town in Colorado. I think about that on the trip home. When it's an especially bad day, I wallow in misery for the entire evening—with the goal of diving deep into those feelings so they can be all done by morning. This is better when accompanied by good ice cream. In the morning, it will be time to be a warrior again.

You really do get to decide. And the right attitude will be key to success, longevity, and satisfaction.

Taking sides

This is one of our toughest and most treacherous areas. There will be radiologists in the group you like working with better than others. There are some you don't like at all and

even seeing their names pop up on e-mail stirs a visceral reaction. There are also factions in the radiology group. You may personally agree with one faction more than another. All of this is like gears in a complex machine and if you make a false step, the gears can crush you.

As a manager, your ultimate goal is to ensure the practice remains viable as a business—and you need to remind yourself of this on a regular basis so it can regulate your behavior and decisions. It frequently means running through the drill of how each faction (or shareholder) will react to certain situations and, over time, you'll get pretty good at predicting reactions. It means asking yourself, “What's the worst that could happen if we go in this direction?” and going through that exercise even when the decisions or directions seem innocuous. Even when you do this conscientiously, you will miss some.

Taking sides can be career fatal. Even when you do everything in your power to remain neutral you may be perceived as taking sides. If you are an administrative leader, you are perceived as the lieutenant of the senior members of the group—and in fact you serve in that role. As new physicians become partners, they do so with a vote and some opinions. If enough of them share the opinion that there needs to be a physician leadership change, you may find that it could be a good strategy to get to know them and make sure they know you. They need to know that just because you said “no” to some of their excellent ideas, it was for a reason—like they were in violation of numerous Medicare regulations, which regularly negate good business ideas—and not because you just don't like their ideas.

The message here is to pay attention to the gears, know that dynamics in the group will change, and be aware of where you are at all times. Make the decision to ensure the financial viability of the business and keep that as your “true North” compass direction. Even then the subsequent decisions may be difficult, but it's easier than ping-pong back and forth between personalities and factions (which will occur anyway, but hopefully to a lesser degree).

It's best to start with the choice to be personality and faction neutral rather than going with personal inclinations. It's also essential to remember that a change in physician leadership can literally occur over night—or with one critical vote.

Ethics

Ethical choices are easier when there is a clear “violation of the law” consequence, and in radiology they are often thrust upon us as vague Medicare regulations. Radiologists, by their very scientific nature and native intellect, are quick to identify potential loopholes in new regulations. So, when in doubt, make sure you have the contact information for a leading healthcare attorney at hand.

Perhaps the most frustrating ethical situations occur in imaging center marketing. You maintain strict guidelines for anti-kickback implications and gifts, only to watch the center down the street gain financially for handing out baseball tickets and gift cards for MRI referrals. And the frustrating thing is that they have been doing so for a decade without consequences. Do you do the right thing even if it hurts financially or join the competition in the mud?

How do you stand your ground when the physicians (innocently) ask “Why can’t we just do...?” Two answers have worked pretty well:

1. It’s against the law. No matter how much I like you, I’m not willing to do time for you.
2. Then, as they ask how many radiologists are in fact doing time, you remind them of the more likely penalty scenario—exclusion from the Medicare program, which in effect ends their ability to practice medicine. This usually has a greater impact than discussing prison time.

Very honestly, it would probably be possible to violate some Medicare provisions without getting caught. On the other hand, it is difficult enough to conduct business without making an honest error and inadvertently being in violation—sometimes facing significant penalties for those errors. In my mind, it has simply never been worth trying to manipulate the system.

So far it has been easy to make the decision not to manipulate the gray areas for short-term gain. It has been more difficult remaining a diligent student of emerging regulations and knowing when a seemingly logical operational decision might have just violated one, or knowing what to do if an error is uncovered. (Hint: Ignoring it is not the best choice; see comment about having a great healthcare attorney on speed dial.)

In our business lives, just as in our personal lives, each day brings dozens of choices with some obvious and some less obvious risks and rewards. We function in a highly regulated and frustrating business environment. You can’t change that, but you can decide whether to be a victim or a warrior. It’s the same job whatever you decide, but there are wide variations in the element of fun associated with the decision. Here’s to the warriors! (And a quick hug to the group-hug folks—it’ll be OK). **]]]]**



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