Avoiding “Spray and Pray”:
Education is Not Always the Answer

When mistakes and errors occur in our organizations, it is our obligation to analyze these problems and assess the reason or reasons they occurred. These problems have many different names: sentinel events, incidents, near misses. When these errors occur, we often form a task force or committee to examine the situation, discuss it, diagram the reasons it occurred, and so on. The action of reflecting on the events is valuable and important. Where we often get stuck in our efforts to make things better is that our typical leadership response to an isolated error is to institute a house-wide mandatory competency for everyone.

This approach of “spraying” education and/or a competency requirement on everyone throughout the organization in hopes of improving things is what I call the “spray and pray” approach. We spray the education on everyone and pray that it improves outcomes.

Most people say, “Well, education can’t hurt.” But I beg to differ. It can actually do a great deal of harm. If we use educational strategies to address anything other than an education deficit, we send the inappropriate and even damaging message to our employees that they are not knowledgeable enough or smart enough to carry out the work. That message, when sent too often or at inappropriate times, can create an attitude of “Who cares?” or “Why try?” If an area of the organization works hard to improve, but another area makes a mistake, applying education across the board can actually hurt our overall outcomes.

It also happens often that our broadly applied efforts to improve the skills in which a few people are falling short can make the people who are excelling feel unseen and unappreciated. With a spray and pray approach, the excellers have to do the mandatory activity in spite of their excellent outcomes. They start to question why they’re asked to track their outcomes at all. They wonder why they try to improve and be proactive when their efforts are never really acknowledged. I have seen organizations that use too many educational responses or mandatory competencies to solve problems turn good teams into mediocre teams, which inevitably turns good organizations into mediocre organizations. The teams and groups do not see why they should try to be proactive if it is never recognized.
Of course education is valuable, but much like a hammer, it is more valuable for some things than others. Use education only when there is a clear indication that a lack of knowledge or skill was the reason for the error. When analyzing an event, make sure the analysis includes all areas of possible deficit:

- System problems
- Availability of tools
- Departmental barriers
- Communication barriers
- Attitudinal issues
- Individual performance patterns
- Any other barriers that hinder people from taking the right actions

Here are two things that will help every educator and leader in health care to avoid falling into the trap of using the spray and pray approach:

1. First and foremost, please do a full, systematic reflection on the situation before using any education response or intervention in an effort to improve outcomes. This analysis is well worth the time and resources. Is there truly a gap in knowledge, skill, or ability? Typically there are many other contributing factors: systems issues, communication breakdowns, siloed department responses or support, disruptive attitudes or behaviors, issues with availability of appropriate tools or supplies, distractions in the work environment, etc.

2. When a problem is identified and thoroughly explored, do not automatically respond to that problem with an organization-wide mandatory competency. Forward the analysis to the relevant services areas and departments through the competency identification form. Seed these problematic items into the Worksheet for Identifying Ongoing Competency found on pages 25-26 of *The Ultimate Guide to Competency Assessment in Health Care*. With this approach, we are not forcing these groups or teams to *do* a competency. We are requiring them to *consider* this as a competency in light of their outcomes.

This means that even though a mistake happens in another area, our group or team will be asked to consider and reflect on this item as a possible competency for our area. Our team will be given the outcomes and objectives that are desired in this procedure or action, and asked to
reflect on our own outcomes in this area. If we are achieving the desired outcome, we do not need to consider a competency. However, if we show problems in this area or don’t have enough data to be certain what our outcomes may be, we need to consider this as one of our competencies for this time period.

This approach will help move us away from the spray and pray approach and get us to a place where high performance is recognized and lower performance is addressed, but only in the areas that need it. This will save time and money while contributing to an environment that focuses on and rewards excellence. We also put ownership into the hands of the people who do the work every day, guided by the leadership vision for the whole organization.