Understanding the impact on personnel and the underlying mechanisms of relational coordination

Caroline Logan, Curt Lindberg, Jennifer Potts, Anthony Suchman, Bob Merchant, Marcus Thygeson, Randy Thompson

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Data source
Themes from semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 staff members, ranging from front-line clinicians to senior executives, all of whom had participated in Relational Coordination-informed improvement efforts.

Positive impacts

1) RC changes how people think about their work: It fosters systems thinking, helping people understand their own work in the context of the larger whole. It also helps them pay more attention to who else is involved in their work processes, valuing the multiplicity of perspectives and heightening awareness of interconnections and interdependencies.

   It’s been eye opening - how many people depend on each other to get things done... I no longer take for granted the work of others and am careful about making assumptions about what they do and why they do it. (case manager)

   RC has made me more aware of the complexity of seemingly simple issues. This enlightening awareness has made me more compassionate and understanding of my colleagues and the work they do. And, helped me appreciate the challenges they face. (internal OD consultant)

   I was brand new at Billings Clinic when I got involved in the ICU project. The experience helped me build relationships and made me think – who else needs to be involved. It’s not just about me. This was a huge shift. (nursing informaticist)

   The whole foundation of the interdisciplinary team doesn’t just exist at the bedside, but at the leadership level and between units and departments. RC has helped me appreciate this and focus more on relationships and less on personalities. If we can collaborate well at the leadership level, this will trickle down to better patient care. (unit manager)
2) RC promotes inclusiveness and improves collaboration: It promotes behavior change that includes more relationship-building, communication and shared decision-making and less blaming. It encourages people to engage all the participants in a given work process and to value the multiplicity of perspectives.

    I believe cooperation at the bedside is better. There is more joint problem solving around the needs of the patient. (intensivist)

    Before my exposure to RC I thought all aspects of care should be driven by nursing. Now I see it’s a team process. As a consequence, I’m much more inclusive now. (ICU nurse)

    The comfort level of professionals from different disciplines in the ICU with raising concerns, making suggestions and solving problems together has increased dramatically. (nursing director)

    I don’t do the blame game. I use positive language and avoid thinking, ‘why did they do that?’ (occupational therapist)

    In a meeting this morning with a neurosurgeon and nursing leaders about concerns he had about quality on the new ortho-neurosurgery unit and thinking about how to deal with these concerns, I could have issued a new policy or some instructions to staff on how to deal with the problems. In this case, I thought it best to focus on interactions and relationships between the neurosurgeons and unit nursing staff. I drew on key RC principles, like shared goals and shared knowledge to facilitate what turned out to be a very productive exchange. (physician executive)

3) RC approach promotes personal development and fulfillment: The new perspectives, behavior changes, improved relationships and improved performance associated with RC increase people’s sense of self-efficacy and confidence. RC fosters learning and increases their sense of joy, meaning and pride in their work.

    The experience in the ICU made me feel part of something important and helped me realize I can make contributions to the organization. (occupational therapist)

    …knowing that there is a name for this, …a theory [RC], something magical happens. It gives us increased confidence and more insights to bring things together around the needs of the patient. (intensivist)

    I’m a new leader here and have had to learn a lot. RC has given me new perspectives and greater self-awareness. The theory has also helped me learn to welcome different perspectives. It’s opened my eyes so much that I’ll be including RC in one of my personal development goals for the coming year. (pharmacy manager)
It makes the job better. Being friends and caring about the people you work with makes work more fun. It is especially helpful on the stressful days when all you do is run from emergency to emergency. (intensivist)

4) RC improves the organizational climate and strengthens employee engagement and commitment: As RC initiatives improve collaboration within and across disciplines, it stimulates cascading culture change across the organization.

Seeing the passion of those involved in the ICU effort left a mark. I came to appreciate how much more colleagues can contribute if given the opportunity to work on something they care about and processes like RC to guide them. (nurse informaticist)

I’ve seen RC be embraced by staff from many disciplines, seen leadership embrace the principles and watched as RC has been integrated into regular operations...I’m thrilled to see integration of RC into the new nurse residency program and the collaboration between the internal medicine and nurse residencies. (nursing director)

[RC has] significantly impacted how I feel about Billings Clinic and my work. [it] has added spice to my work. It’s also given me the opportunity to get to know people in other disciplines and in leadership. Together, this experience has given me great faith in the organization and its direction. (occupational therapist)

Challenges for staff and leaders

1) Off-putting jargon
2) Discomfort with emergent design (preferring clear direction and expectations)
3) Staff availability for meetings (above and beyond their daily responsibilities)
4) Worries about resourcing organization-wide implementation

Underlying mechanisms for individual motivation, engagement and change

1) Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan): intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. See www.selfdeterminationtheory.org
2) Adult Mental Development (Kegan and Lahey): developing capacity for multiple perspective taking. See Immunity to Change (Kegan and Lahey, 2009) and Changing on the Job (Garvey, 2012)