Tammy McCausland:

This is Tammy McCausland bringing you SROA Soundboard, SROA's podcast for radiation oncology administrators. I'm joined in conversation today with Patty Saponaro, associate chair for administration in the Department of Radiation Oncology at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Patty spoke on adding value as a leader in radiation oncology at SROA's annual meeting. Thank you for joining me today, Patty.

Patty Saponaro:

Thank you for having me.

Tammy McCausland:

My first question for you is how do leaders know if they have strong, emotional and social IQ?

Patty Saponaro:

I think the short answer is if you have risen to a level of leadership within a department as an administrator, I think a huge part of that is because of a sense of emotional intelligence. I would also say if you are the go-to person or a go-to person in your department or practice, for issues of concern among the way team members are interacting with each other, working together, or when there are personality clashes, I think that's another clue that people regard you as a person who has a good sense of emotional intelligence.

Tammy McCausland:

Why is knowing your team and your audiences important as an administrator?

Patty Saponaro:

A guiding principle that I try to work with is the idea that I want to do the best job in that moment on that project, whatever it may be. And I try my best to avoid rework at all costs. And so I think by starting with knowing your audience, let's take, for example, you're doing a tour or an orientation for someone, thinking about who the audience is will help you tailor the message, tailor the tour, tailor whatever the project is to their needs, to the best that you can. And it really enhances the success of whatever the effort is. But again, I want to circle back and say, it also can really reduce the amount of rework at the end. Now you can't know for sure every question or every need that an audience has, but by taking the time to think it through, you're setting yourself up for more success.

Tammy McCausland:

Why should administrators ask their team or teams what they value? And how often should they ask this question?

Patty Saponaro:

I love this question and I love incorporating this into my work. One of the main reasons to invite your team to be part of, let's say, a big project or a new effort that you're going to implement is because it's not just your responsibility. Almost everything involves some sort of team and team work to be the most successful. And if you weren't to be the most successful, as an administrator, you shouldn't feel that everything is on your shoulders. Ultimately, a lot of things do fall on your shoulders. But to create a really wonderful new effort asking team members help share that responsibility. And if you think about

it, that also means that enhances buy-in from all different parts of the team and on a human to human level, we know that people leave organizations, not because of the work, but because of their supervisors. And so the more you can help people feel heard, both in terms of their input, their concerns, the more satisfied they will be and the more stable your team will be. So in terms of the question of how often to ask, I think it depends on your style and your structure. I really think it's important to have standing meetings with teams. My preference is to do it weekly, even if there's nothing pressing, because then the relationship of the team is constantly being built. And when there is a need for something important, it fits naturally into those relationships and it's not something that's coming from left field.

Tammy McCausland:

And what should administrators do if there's a disconnect between what they value and what their team members value, or if there's a disconnect among the team members themselves?

Patty Saponaro:

So this has happened of course, it's happened to everyone, definitely has happened to me. And ultimately, the way I handled it was through... I'm thinking it was a specific example, so ultimately the way I handle it was being sure that everyone had a chance to air. In this case, there was an A decision or a B decision, and we couldn't think of any other options. So either you were thinking it should be A or thinking it should be B. And in that case, of the people sitting around the table, roughly four were voting for A and four were voting for B. So it was really important for me as the ultimate decision maker to be sure I thoroughly understood all the perspectives around the table. And so taking sufficient time to allow everyone to speak and encouraging those around the table who might've been more quiet, tempted to walk away still disagreeing without speaking, making sure everybody had a chance to speak was ultimately what helped me make a decision. Now, I think in that case, I did not feel that there was really a right or a wrong decision, but we had to go with one of them. And so what I wanted was confidence that I had heard all the angles from which I should think about it. And then I ultimately said to the team, "This is one of those times when I'm going to make the decision. If it turns out to be a great decision, I'll give you all credit for it. It turns out to be allowed to decision. I'll take the blame."

Tammy McCausland:

In your presentation, you talked about interviewing and hiring onboarding. So one of the questions I had is how would you phrase the question when asking a potential hire about a people challenge and why is this question so important?

Patty Saponaro:

So I'll start with the, "Why is it so important?" First. There, of course, is a history in the field of medicine of a very strict hierarchy with the physician at the top. Now there's some good reasons for that, because they're the ones ultimately who are on the line for everything we do at radiation oncology, it's their signature attesting to the fact that we're going to do everything right. So you can't take that away, and of course the training and all of that too, that they've done. But over time I think we've learned that there is more success. Patients are safer. We do a better job. Employees are more stable and better able to keep people safe if we can relax that hierarchy and let people step up where it's important to do that.

So historically, it didn't matter so much what kind of a team player the physician was. You were looking at their credentials and if they were a good doctor, then that was all that mattered. Although, all of us who ever worked with physicians knew the thing worked better with the people who work collegially. So

now, jump forward to today and we have a different sensibility of how important being a member of the team and having good citizens as part of our team is. And so the reason it's important, a very practical reason it's important too, is because in most of our situations, the administrator is the person who ends up dealing with, what we'll call, the bad behavior of a person who's not a good fit, the behavior of a person that is not fitting in with the culture and not working in the way we need them to work. So that's kind of a practical reason why.

So now jumping back to the first part of the question, "How would I ask it?" I have done this a lot now, so I have a standard way of doing it. And what I typically say is, "If you are an adult in our society, you have had situations in which it was difficult to work with somebody. We have all had people challenges like that. Can you share with me an example of a time that you found it challenging to work with someone, what you did to work through it and how it turned out?" Now, the reason I like to ask it in that way is it's pretty specific and it's not the kind of thing that most people have thought of beforehand. And so you tend to get pretty honest answers and if they try to give me a generic answer, like, "Well, I always think it's important to work together with people in a nice way." That's not enough for me. I'm going to press and say, "Can you share a specific example?" So I hope that gives people some confidence and a good way to do it.

Tammy McCausland:

I think it's a really insightful response and a great phrasing because I think most people who have interviewed for jobs know about the behavioral questions. And usually they come out as like, "Tell me about a time when you've had to deal with someone who's difficult." And then people give these panned answers they've learned over time to prepare. So I think the way you're getting at it is encouraging administrators to be very specific and maybe it allows people to be more honest and frank without worrying about, "Well, I'm going to come off sounding like I'm not a good fit." Thanks for sharing that. You also mentioned in your talk that administrators should ask interviewees about quality improvement, what role they've had in a quality improvement initiative or project. Can you elaborate a little bit on that, about why that's important?

Patty Saponaro:

Sure, sure. I think of course you have to start with the obvious answer that in radiation oncology, everyone has to have safety mindfulness. But there are practices, there are departments within radiation oncology where it is more of a stated expectation or less of a stated expectation. In our department is very much a stated expectation and so that is stated clearly by the chair in that each of us has two jobs; our job is to do our work and the second job is to make it better, to do the work better. And quality and safety fits right into that. So we expect everybody from the scheduler who takes the first phone call all the way through the therapist who's pressing beam on to be always thinking, "How can I make this better? How can I make this better?"

So in terms of quality and safety, especially for a faculty member, in my case, academic center, a faculty member comes through in a practice, a community practice as well, an MD coming in or a physicist coming in tend to be the technical leaders in our departments or practices. And with them coming in, you really want to know that they are going to assume responsibility on their own for making the work that they do better and safer. Because everybody should do that. And it can't be any one person, the director or the leader of the practice or any one administrator who drives that. Each individual has to drive it. So when you come back to the interview, the way I like to ask that question is to say, "In radiation oncology, everyone cares about quality and safety. Can you tell me about a quality or safety

improvement that you were part of, what you did and how it turned out?" And again, there are people who will say, "Well, I sat on a committee that listened to all the safety issues that were reported."

And that is so different from somebody who says, "We had a problem with the way the inpatient referrals were flowing, and so I pulled together a work group and we discussed all the different roles that would touch that process and came up with a better workflow and implemented it." That's the person I want on my team, somebody who will be thinking in that way and who will be understanding everything from you have to have a multi role approach in radiation oncology, have to get buy-in from a group of critical people, and you have to do the work to figure out the new workflow. And then, the icing on the cake or the cherry on top, would be the person who says, "And then we went back and revisited it because this part of it didn't work right, like we expected, so we went back and made it better." That's the mindset we want. And so that's what I'm trying to drill in and find.

Tammy McCausland:

In your presentation, you gave a lot of great advice about what to look for and questions to ask of a perspective hire. But for administrators who may not have been able to attend your presentation, do you have two or three tips or strategies that you could give them about how to determine which prospective hires are a good fit?

Patty Saponaro:

I think the most important point that I would want anyone to take from the presentation and the podcast is the notion of seeing yourself at the table and then actively being at the table and adding value. So very frequently, prospective faculty members will say to me, "Wow, this interview is very different from all the others." And I really see that as a point of pride, but also I feel like, "Wow, it's a good thing I'm doing this because no one else on our faculty is addressing these issues." And so my chair didn't say to me, "Hey, I want you to interview people and find out about their quality and safety mindfulness and their citizenship." I took that on myself because I know that that's my role in the department. And so there are times when I'm on email trails where they're saying, "Okay, rank the candidates." And I'm right in there. And there probably are people who are surprised by that. But the fact that I am listening from a very different perspective does add value and each of us needs to have confidence that our perspectives do add value. And we need to just jump in and be at the table. Sheryl Sandberg would say, "Lean in." And I think that's the bottom line point. Think about... You do have to know yourself and your own skills and then jump in and you may be surprised at how often other people really appreciate it and respect it.

Tammy McCausland:

What should administrators include in a new employee's onboarding and orientation?

Patty Saponaro:

Well, the easy and short answer is ask your team, ask the leader of the therapist what it is that they want a new MD to know. Ask the dosimetry team what do they want a new MD to know, to work with them. Same with the billing and coding people, same with the scheduling staff, same with physics, of course. I think when you look at all those groups, what I have found interesting in my experience is that there are certain commonalities that rise to the top. They want to talk about how we do things generally, how we like to work together. "Here's your contact, and I want to support you. If you have a question about this thing, come to me."

But then specifically, for billing and coding, that's going to be a much more refined and defined kind of arena of information. And so this is where it is really important for the whole team to feel invested because they are the ones who know what causes problems when a new person doesn't know, "Oh, this is how we do that thing." Or when a new person is getting their information from a source that's not as reliable. So I think those are the key things that you want to be sure the whole team, because they know the pain point, and you want to be sure that you are addressing the obvious pain points that exist.

Tammy McCausland:

You mentioned in your presentation that you use checklists in the orientation. Can you clarify or elaborate on how you use them and why they're important?

Patty Saponaro:

Yes. For all the same reasons that pilots use checklists, that therapists use checklists, and some of those reasons include you don't want to use your brain power for the obvious thing that happens every time that you don't want to have to remember. You shouldn't have to think about every detail every single time a new person comes. You should have a standard way of doing this and a standard list of things that are included. That's the best way to be sure... Okay, so with training and onboarding is a great example. There is research that shows the best training doesn't happen when person A learns it and then they share it with person B and then person B shares it with C and C shares it with D. It becomes like a game of telephone where the message is slightly changed person after person. So you want to have a consistent standard. And the best way to do that is to have it specified in a document clearly in a checklist. So I think that's the main thing is that we should be using our brain power for other things, not trying to remember what we did the last time somebody new came in.

Tammy McCausland:

That's a good point. What do you ask in the followup with new employees when you reconnect with them one month later?

Patty Saponaro:

I basically want their feedback because they're the most current customer for our recruiting process, for our onboarding process and for me to... So those are the two most important transactional pieces that I want to do with a new person coming on board. But the third and really equally important is that I want to be sure I am establishing relationship with them. I want them to know they can come to me anytime with their concerns and their questions, and I'm going to listen to them and hear them and help them get good information. And, if you can think about it, I might be, in people's minds, a safer person to ask a hard question, or what they might see as a dumb question, rather than going to the chair of the department or the head of a division group in a practice. So I think it's critically important that I have my own relationship with each of them. And Stephen Covey talks about this as developing an emotional bank account. This is a way that I'm putting some collateral into that emotional bank account, because the day may come when I have to address a difficult issue with them. And I want to do everything I can to set that moment in the future up for success, right from the get-go.

Tammy McCausland:

Have you ever had a situation where a new employee's response has surprised you?

Patty Saponaro:

I can't say that I've had a specific surprise except in as much as the way that people can surprise you just generally, and the things that... Sometimes the questions that are asked and I think, "Wow, I can't believe nobody saw that coming. We didn't get that one covered. Or that they've been here this long and they still aren't quite sure about that one." So I take all those as points for future learning. But I can't say that I've really had a person to person surprise. I just try to take people where they are and help them move forward.

Tammy McCausland:

In your talk you also outlined having a new procedure process. So I wanted to ask for the people who didn't attend the talk, why is this so important and why do you need to share it with new hires?

Patty Saponaro:

I would say the reason I think it's so important stems from my very personal experience with this. When I first came into this role as a new administrator, there was a very forceful new MD faculty member who had a lot of really great ideas. And so he came in thinking that he could just make his ideas happen. And so he started making these ideas happen. And very quickly we realized that there was no organization of all the other work that had to happen besides just having the great idea. And his sense of what it took to implement his new ideas was very, very limited and not really realistic. And so there were inconsistent expectations on his part and among the team and it led to some really bad feelings between him and a lot of members of the team in radiation oncology.

Patty Saponaro:

And so, of course we want to prevent that if we can. And of course we want to help that new person who has lots of great ideas figure out what's the best one or two ideas. We want to help them understand. And if we can use the process itself to help them learn more about how we like to work together, and what's important in our department and our practice, then that's the win-win that we're looking for all the way around. If we can do it in a structured way where the intake staff weighs in and says what they could see as potential challenges and the way they can make it work, therapy staff can weigh in and say what are potential staff challenges and how they can support it to make it work. In the end, everybody comes out feeling better about the process instead of feeling really awful about how, "We can't meet those needs and why didn't you come to us?" There can be a lot, so many ill feelings that, in the end, being able to turn it into something positive is a huge shift and so much better for the group.

Tammy McCausland:

Is there anything else you would like to share with administrators today?

Patty Saponaro:

I think one final fact that I would want to share, and I remember learning this in graduate school, and I really am sorry I don't have the reference for it here, but it's a striking fact, is that 50% of business decisions, 50% of business decisions, fail. Not because it was a bad idea, not because people didn't want it to work, but because people did not put in sufficient time on the front end planning and thinking through all of the aspects of the decision. So if you just stop for a minute and think about that, 50% of business decisions fail because people didn't spend sufficient time on the front end planning. There's so many pressures to hurry, hurry, and make things happen. But if you know that that is a fact that you are

so much more likely to succeed if you take the time on the front end, it should give us confidence to take that time, to hear people, and to end up with efforts that are going to be more successful in the end.

Tammy McCausland:

Your insights have been great, Patty. I really appreciate your time today.

Patty Saponaro:

Well, thanks for asking me to do it, Tammy. I really enjoyed it.

Tammy McCausland:

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