Several years ago, I was making rounds with the Chief Operating Officer at Midland Memorial Hospital in Midland, Texas. When we reached the Facilities Management Department, the Director proudly showed us a chart illustrating a million-dollar reduction in utility expenses over the previous year. The primary factor, he told us, was not technological – it was cultural. As a result of our work to build a culture of ownership, people were turning off lights and turning down air conditioning when they left a room, just like they did at home.

The most important three words in my book *The Florence Prescription: From Accountability to Ownership* are “Proceed Until Apprehended.” This phrase reflects the spirit that drives a culture of ownership: If you see a problem, fix it; if you see an opportunity, pursue it; if you need help, ask for it. At Midland Health that phrase has become part of the cultural DNA. Beyond the significant cost savings, the mindset it reflects has also spurred significant improvements in quality, safety, patient satisfaction, and nurse retention.

At Children’s Hospital New Orleans (CHNOLA), just as at Midland Memorial, every associate receives *The Florence Prescription*, which includes a special foreword by CEO John Nickens. Among other activities, each day their safety huddle begins with the team reciting The Pickle Pledge: “I will turn every complaint into either a blessing or a constructive suggestion.” When CHNOLA staff were invited to share their achievements at the annual Quality and Safety Conference of the Children’s Hospital Association, their presentation was titled: “Proceed Until Apprehended: A Cultural Journey.” Lisa Labat, Assistant Vice President for Nursing, was one of the presenters. She explains: “The ‘Proceed Until Apprehended philosophy’ has helped us break down silos and create a sense of urgency for preventing problems and fixing them as soon as they are discovered.”

Another Values Coach partner hospital found that the “Proceed Until Apprehended” philosophy was vital to implementing a new electronic health records system. Their go-live event was seamless. A comparably sized hospital in a nearby community implemented the same electronic health records system at about the same time, using the same outside consultants, but their go-live event was catastrophic. The difference was culture. At the first hospital, when problems arose people would “Proceed Until Apprehended” and either find a way to fix the problem or find the help they needed to get

"Proceeding Until Apprehended" for quality and safety at Children’s Hospital New Orleans.
it fixed. At the second hospital, when the same sorts of problems arose people would complain that the software didn’t work, that administration didn’t support them, and that they could never reach the consultants.

**IMAGINED HELPLESSNESS AND INSTITUTIONAL PTSD**

One of the statements included in our validated VCI-17 Culture Assessment Survey is: “Our people don’t just complain about problems, they work to find solutions.” Every time we conduct the survey for a hospital, a significant majority of respondents disagree – and often strongly disagree – with that statement. We have never worked with a hospital in which more than 10 percent of respondents strongly agreed with it.

This usually reflects a variation of what psychologists call learned helplessness, or imagined helplessness. A paradox we see in many hospitals is that people on the front lines are afraid or unwilling to take actions for fear of being “held accountable” by management, while management is frustrated that people at the front lines complain about problems rather than working to find solutions.

In a letter to a friend, Florence Nightingale wrote, “I attribute my success […] to the fact that I never gave or took an excuse.” We hear all sorts of excuses for why people are unwilling to take action: union rules, corporate bureaucracy, no budget for whatever it is that needs to be done, fear of the consequences of wrong actions.

One excuse people sometimes make for not pointing out problems or taking action to rectify those problems is a purported fear of retribution. I’m currently working with the Chief Nursing Officer of a large, academic medical center who is trying to push decision-making further down into the organization. Some of the resistance she faces springs from those fears. When she asks for specific examples of actual experience of such retaliation, the answers are always ancient history; some years back, the organization had a shame-and-blame culture from the top down. I think of that as institutional PTSD.

These three words, “Proceed Until Apprehended,” and the philosophy they reflect, are a sure antidote to the imagined helplessness and institutional PTSD that so often prevent people from taking the initiative to solve problems rather than just complain about them.

**FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO OWNERSHIP**

Many of the organizations we work with list accountability as a core value or operating principle. As well-intentioned as this is, an excessive focus on accountability can be counterproductive. By definition, accountability is retrospective, negative, and almost always destimulating. People can only be held accountable for what they have done or not done in the past; you cannot hold someone accountable for what they might do in the future.

Being held accountable is always seen as a negative; you don’t hold someone accountable for accomplishing something great, only for having failed to do so.

And being told that you will be “held accountable” is almost always demotivating; it replaces any anticipation of accomplishment with a fear of consequences. As Farson and Keyes show in their book *The Innovation Paradox*, an excessive focus on accountability can cripple innovation and risk-taking and, when taken to an extreme, can cause people to behave unethically.

As I write this, I’m thinking about a heartbreaking LinkedIn post by a health care professional for whom I have great respect. She’d taken her mother to a hospital emergency department where she spent her last night on this earth being boarded in the ED hallway because there were no beds.
available. When my friend asked for a milkshake for her mom, she was told that they were not available after 6 p.m.

Of course, no one can be held accountable for the fact that they failed to ask a security officer to unlock the kitchen so they could pour milk and ice cream into a glass to fulfill a dying woman’s last wish. You can’t hold someone accountable for not doing something that wasn’t in their job description. But in that sense, accountability establishes a pretty low bar. Someone with a “Proceed Until Apprehended” mindset would have found a way to honor that last wish, even if it meant breaking into the kitchen after 6 p.m.

Kalispell Regional Healthcare in Kalispell, Montana has a statement of five core values, to which is appended this overarching principle: “Above all ... do the right thing!” Whether or not you use that specific wording, I hope your organization is committed to encouraging people to always do the right thing. This makes the decision to “Proceed Until Apprehended” easy. If it’s the right thing to make a milkshake for a patient even though the kitchen is closed, if it’s the right thing to turn off the lights when you leave a conference room, if it’s the right thing to confront bullying behavior or turn a complaint into a constructive suggestion, then “Proceed Until Apprehended.”

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