Act Rather Than Be Acted Upon: Five Ideas for Managing Change
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We are in the midst of one of the most dynamic periods in urgent care's history—facing government "reform," provider shortages, rising operating costs and a population that's growing older and sicker—it's clear these are anything but "ordinary times." How do you make sure that you and your urgent care center stay focused in this turbulent operating environment?

It's easy for urgent care operators to get distracted. Often uncertainty turns into inactivity—hunkering down to "protect" the current business, preserving cash, and turning a blind eye to growth. Other times it turns to anger—assuming the role of "victim" and lashing out at politicians, insurance companies, or professional associations who have "abandoned us." And most often, it leads to a continuation of the status quo, even when we know what has worked in the past won't necessarily work today. None of these responses will bring success.

Change is better viewed by the opportunity it presents to re-think urgent care's positioning as an access point to the health care system and re-build its operating and business models to better serve consumers. Stop mourning the days when things were better—that was then and this is now. Even when things appear to be tough—and hurdles seem immountable—you've got to move on and look forward. Certainly the future will look different—it could be better—choose to be a winner who controls his future.

Follows are five steps the urgent care operator can take to manage change in a positive way:

1. Start with a guiding principle.

In Hinduism, a "mantra" is a "statement that when repeated, creates transformation." Consider the mantras of various organizations in Figure 1. You'll see that a mantra is different from a mission statement, which describes to the "outside" world "who" an organization is. Rather, a mantra provides the framework for how a business conducts itself and assures everyone knows what attitudes and behaviors are expected going forward. That's why a mantra must be "chanted" on a regular basis to assure providers, managers and staff are all on the same "page" (values-wise and goals-wise) and are marching in "lockstep."

Figure 1: Mantra vs. Mission Statement

Company	Mantra (s)	Mission Statement
Wendy's	Fast, fresh and made to order. Quality is our recipe.	To deliver superior quality products and services for our customers and communities through leadership, innovation, and partnerships.
Walmart	Always low prices. We sell for less.	We save people money so they can live better.
Southwest Airlines	If you take care of the employee, the employee will take care of the customer, and then the customer will take care of the shareholder.	The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit.

For example, Walmart's mission to be the lowest price retailer has resulted in a business model based on operating scale and cutting edge technology that minimizes costs and pushes suppliers to sell at razor thin margins. But it's Walmart's mantra—"Always Low Prices"—that guides its executives to fly coach, share budget hotel rooms, and work half-days on Saturdays. At Walmart, any activity that doesn't result in savings for the consumer is discarded—every process is continually value-engineered and even the corporate office in Bentonville, Arkansas is "no frills." The result of Walmart's frugal culture is that its customers "save money, live better."

Figure 2: Every Day Matters

JCPenney's mantra describes more than the "every day" apparel and homegoods the company sells. Rather, it's a reminder to employees to take nothing for granted because in retail, consumer experiences "matter." According to the company's website, "by focusing on life's little moments, we are able to show our customers how we can enhance their every day lives, helping them make each day richer and more inspiring."

2. Organize data for fact-based decision making.

Periods of change require decisions that are data-based and not "gut-based." That's because change brings a rise in emotions that cloud sound judgment. Having tools, metrics, and procedures in place to monitor the key areas of your urgent care operation is like a patient coming in for a checkup. They allow you to identify risks before they result in problems and to diagnose problems so that corrective action can be taken.

If you don't already have them, define performance metrics that include profitability, operational efficiency, clinical quality, and patient satisfaction. Then, set up reporting systems to provide timely information on how the operation is performing as well as long-term trends. A management scorecard, in which key metrics are summarized on one easy-to-read page, can be invaluable in identifying strengths and weaknesses for emotion-free decision-making.

3. Focus on the "good" and isolate the "problems."

Organizations don't become successful by controlling their weaknesses, but rather, by building upon their strengths. In urgent care, a center's "strengths" are the reasons consumers choose it over other options—convenient location, extended hours, friendly staff, quality outcomes. Unfortunately, operating "problems" like system constraints, reimbursement challenges, unreliable vendors, or disgruntled employees can become all-consuming for the urgent care operator.

During periods of change, don't neglect the "good" things about your urgent care center by having everyone involved in the problems. Rather, keep the problems isolated—physically, by job function, and by time allocation. Ensure that the majority of management and staff time is focused on serving patients and building the business.

4. Ask the right questions.

Many urgent care centers fail simply because their operators are out of touch with what's happening within their own businesses. The role of the urgent care operator is to continually ask "why"—

- What are we trying to accomplish? How will our actions affect our short- and long-term profitability?
- What steps can we take to get all of the right information together so we can look at the data objectively?
- What are our competitors doing better than we are, which we can learn from or implement in our own center?
- Are there opportunities out there that we had not thought of before, such as profitable consumer segments or service offerings that others have missed?
- How do we overcome operational, regulatory, reimbursement, or market barriers to taking the operation to the desired "next level?"
- Are we acting for "just the moment" or is this plan sustainable?

If you don't know what questions to ask—get help—outsiders can provide a new perspective and offer solutions you had not previously considered. Also look to well-run organizations in health care and other industries for inspiration. For example, Southwest Airlines has been well-publicized for its “non-conventional” and “employee-centric” culture—but as Figure 3.0 illustrates, it’s also consistently utilized “out of the box” thinking to overcome fairly significant challenges. Southwest’s consistently profitable business model is a reflection of a culture that has been adaptable and business-savvy in an industry known for rigidity, instability, and bankruptcy.

Figure 3: Lessons from Southwest Airlines: Hard times leads to “out of the box” thinking.

As a start-up airline, Southwest’s operating model was to fly businessmen from Dallas to Houston and San Antonio for $26. To eliminate the threat posed by Southwest, cross-town rival Braniff Airways decided to engage in a fare war, reducing its price to $13—far below Southwest’s operating costs. Southwest was faced with two choices—match the $13 and go out of business, or continue charging $26 and go out of business. Southwest’s response? It raised the price to $32 for business travelers but offered a “free” fifth of whisky to full-fare paying passengers. Businessmen travelling on employer expense accounts lined up en masse and Southwest not only beat out Braniff (which eventually bankrupted), it coincidently became the largest distributor of alcohol in the State of Texas.

Southwest’s early competition was the automobile—during airline regulation fares were simply too high for customers to fly on short-haul routes. This meant for the first couple of years, Southwest’s planes were mostly empty and the cash coffers were quickly exhausting. When the airline had to sell a plane in order to make payroll—it was faced with the dilemma of now operating a 4-plane schedule with only 3-planes. Employees were told to “make it work”—and knowing the company’s survival depended on it—they came up with the “10-minute turnaround” and tasks such as taking tickets were shifted from gate agents on the ground to flight attendants in the air. Prior to that time, planes typically sat idle for 1-hour intervals between flights but the 10-minute turnaround not only improved efficiency, the greater emphasis on on-time performance attracted new customers to the airline.

During the decade from 2000-2010, 15 U.S. airlines bankrupted. Remaining “major” carriers including American, United and Delta, began to exploit new revenue streams in the form of “fees”—affecting everything from ticketing to checked baggage to in-flight services. Listening to its customers, Southwest bucked the trend and although analysts estimate the company has forgone over $500 million in prospective fee revenue—during the same period it grew its load factor by 10% resulting in $2 billion in incremental sales (and more satisfied customers who aren’t nickel-and-dimed).

5. Start initiatives.

Despite conventional wisdom favoring stability before taking business risks, periods of intense change can be the optimal time to launch new initiatives. Don't wait for things to get better because by then you'll be left behind—as you analyze data from your operation, identify those areas you have the greatest ability to impact in a positive way, and which align with your guiding principle. And remember, managing change means combining analytics with decency and long-term sustainability, so ask yourself what the "right" thing is, and when it makes sense from a business perspective—*just do it!*

When The Going Gets Tough…

When things are going well, there is rarely motivation to change. But when the going gets tough, people find themselves more open to change, and begin looking for ideas in places never previously considered. So lose the old operating model and business plan. Forget how you've always done things and start fresh. In the face of change you never "bargained" for, you can still find new success measures and in the end, you may find those measures are superior to anything from the past.