

PERSPECTIVE

Sharing the Monkey at Work

Kenneth E. Maddock

Just about everyone has heard the expression “getting the monkey off of your back.” For those of you who may not be familiar with the expression, it means solving a serious problem. The monkey itself represents the problem or a responsibility. I’ve been thinking a lot about this expression recently related to the relationship between the healthcare technology management (HTM) field and information technology (IT).

One of the things I love about our field is the passion and the willingness to take ownership of problems. At times I feel we can take this sense of ownership to an extreme. I’ll never forget the time one of my technicians came to me with a requisition for a toilet plunger. His explanation was that when he is in the patient room, he wants to be able to take care of all of the patient’s needs. Great attitude, but I had to explain to him that while he is taking care of the toilet, specific issues that require his skill set that

have to wait while he does something another department should be doing. While I’m sure we all know those in the HTM field who are perfectly willing to shift work to others and get the monkey off their back, regardless of the consequences for the monkey, I feel there are many more who always want to own the monkey.

About the Author



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Have you ever tried to get a monkey off your back? How about sharing one instead? Healthcare technology management and IT professionals can learn to work together using this metaphor.

Plenty of monkeys belong on our back, and solely on our back. Standalone medical devices and/or systems are an example. Equipment used to have proprietary hardware designed specifically by the manufacturer. If there was networking, once again it was proprietary. You had to have specific training to work on those devices/systems, and with the exception of systems that were mechanical, or used plumbing/hydraulics for which you could turn to engineering for assistance, you were pretty much on your own. That used to be the rule, and many of us grew up as professionals under that paradigm. However, it is becoming more the exception than the rule these days, and has been for some time. Even standalone devices frequently incorporate off-the-shelf computer hardware. Most devices are designed to run on a standard network.

With this new paradigm, more and more HTM professionals understand that in order to effectively support today's medical equipment there is a need for an understanding of IT. If you think about it, the monkey is getting bigger and harder to carry on your own. Unfortunately, too many in the field are taking the approach of stopping, taking a deep breath, and putting on a weightlifting belt so they can carry the additional weight without assistance. Make no mistake; we own the monkey and we should definitely have a role in supporting the monkey. But hoarding the monkey, especially when the monkey is getting bigger and livelier, changing positions every few minutes, isn't the best solution.

Not to mention that if you haven't kept up your infrastructure to support the larger monkey, you run the risk of starving it. A bigger monkey requires more attention. Ignoring it won't make it go away.

While you may think that ignoring the monkey will make it shrink and just go away, we all know better than that. A starving

monkey is an angry monkey. The last thing you want to do is have a monkey making a scene, calling everyone's attention to the fact that you aren't taking proper care of it. A bigger monkey takes a plan. You actually have to think about what you are doing. It's no longer small enough to be satisfied when you hand him a peanut or two. You actually have to have the rigor to sit down and draft a plan. When do you feed him, what do you feed him, where do you get the food to feed him?

Taking care of this monkey is hard work. Some outside our field would wonder why we take on this daunting task. The obvious reason to those of us in the field is that we do it because we care. We feel that taking care of the monkey is our life's work. Recognition and other rewards are secondary to the satisfaction we get by supporting patient care. However, some feel the rewards—compensation specifically—are not adequate based on the demands and importance of the work we do. The reality is that there are those supporting other types of monkeys who will probably always be more heavily compensated than those in our field.

So what is the response to this sobering reality? Once someone realizes that satisfaction is probably going to have to come from a well-tended monkey rather than a shower of money and praise, they sometimes decide to make it someone else's problem. When they get a hint that there is someone else who may be able to carry the monkey, they fling the monkey at them and immediately walk in the other direction. Sometimes the person to whom they tossed the monkey is either unaware that the monkey is being tossed at them or isn't ready to support the monkey on their own, and the monkey can fall. Once that happens we can be very quick to judge the person to whom we attempted to toss the monkey, loudly complaining about their slow response and/or their inability to effectively take care of the monkey.

If you choose not to fling the monkey because you don't want the monkey to fall and you don't trust those to whom you could toss the monkey, another option is to hire more people to assist you in taking care of the monkey. Even if this means hiring people with the exact skillset of the people to whom you didn't want to toss the monkey. Even if

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the people to whom you could have tossed the monkey have the capacity to help you to take care of the monkey. It's not efficient to do this, but it keeps our little monkey-supporting team nice and isolated and prevents us from having to talk to strangers.

So what is all of this about? Why all of this talk about monkeys? Because I believe that taking care of the monkey on our back is important, and I want us to do it the right way. Those of us who have chosen this work have picked a great field in which to work. I can't think of many things more important than helping patients, and the monkey on our back represents all of those things we need to do to ensure that the patients get the safe, effective care they deserve. No, we aren't going to get rich or famous doing this. If you are doing this for any reason other than improving patient care, you should probably consider another field.

But if you do this because you care, you should be thinking about how you can carry the monkey more effectively. The biggest thing you can do is to learn to share the monkey. Get to know those who take care of different but related monkeys. You will find that, together, you two can carry the monkey more efficiently than one person. Although there are many relationships to which this metaphor could apply, I am talking about the relationship between HTM and IT. While the mindset has changed over the years from the idea that there is no need to learn all of that IT stuff, to grudgingly realizing that we have to learn a bit about IT to care for our equipment, to admitting that it is a big part of what we do; we continue to act as though the IT department is an alien entity, not to be trusted. Because we don't trust IT to "get it," we aren't willing to build a relationship that takes advantage of the expertise that already exists in our organizations. Instead, we want to duplicate that expertise.

While some push for duplication of expertise because of the fear that others won't do it correctly, the reality is that many propose the duplication because of a desire to protect our turf. Well, our turf is patient care. We wouldn't even have a field if it wasn't for the patients, and we all have to work together to care most effectively for our patients. Protecting our field shouldn't even be part of

the equation. If we do a great job, our field will take care of itself.

You can see collaboration happening across healthcare. From patient-centered medical homes to accountable care organizations, there is an understanding that we need to break down barriers in order to improve population health and the care experience, as well as cut costs. There is no way to realize these objectives without eliminating silos and working together effectively. It's happening all across healthcare and we should be leading the way. You could argue that the same concept applies to our relationship with vendors, but that is a discussion for another time.

There is a lot of great work going on in our field, and a lot of passionate people trying to drive improvements, including collaborating with others in healthcare. But I still encounter too many people who see enemies everywhere they turn, rather than potential partners.

I hope that you are one of the many who are leading the way in using collaboration to drive improvements in quality, efficiency, and customer service. But if you still have a tendency to look at other teams and believe that the right way to make change is to go to battle with them, please consider as an alternative figuring out how you can share the monkey. ■

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