Poetry as a Health Care Management Tool

Ralph K. Allen, Jr.1,2

An overlooked, or certainly infrequently seen form of management communique is the poem. Health care management provides a set of examples—demonstrating psychotherapeutic value to the variety of groups living and working in such a setting. Poetry is shown to be an artful partner not only as a therapeutic tool, but also to have purposeful value in management practice.

The clinical practice of group therapy in the health care setting has close affinity to business group activity. Business groups, including department heads, employee empowerment groups, quality circles, total quality management teams, and other subsets of organized business exhibit interactive dynamics that may be observed in the context of psychotherapy. In both sets of operations, the underlying principles of group dynamics work to produce positive and rewarding results for the larger entity while simultaneously reinforcing individual perceptions and understanding of concepts, issues, and problem solving (Silvermarie, 1988; Allen, 1991).

As Mazza (1988a) stated, "... the net result of the group sessions [is] to restore decision making to group members, validate their feelings, and promote change" (p. 491). Management practices in many arenas have introduced such notions into the business atmosphere with increasing recognition of the values inherent in participation-based dynamics rather than recipient-based practices (Mazza, 1988b).

1Ph.D., Licensed Nursing Home Administrator, Consultant, and Member of the Greater Spokane Council on Aging.
2Address reprint requests to Ralph K. Allen, Jr., W. 418 Euclid Ave., Spokane, WA 99205.
Poems, as one form of language use, communicate feelings, direction, principle, and message in a uniquely qualitative manner. When used in the business setting, they can produce positive responses at both the small group and individual levels. This is consistent with Mazza’s (1988a) findings that, “in using poetry . . . , the aspects of expression and communication are of primary importance” (p 486).

In recent, semipopular and business management literature, a few executives and managers have asserted their feelings about business in poetic ways (Power and Siconolfi (1990) in the Wall Street Journal; Farnham (1991) in Fortune Magazine; and Autry, 1992). Typical examples focus on personal impressions of business-related activity. The humanistic side of management is captured in titles such as “On Firing A Salesman,” “V.I.P., A Conversation,” and “The Directors.”

During the past decade, I have used poetic license in both hospitals and nursing homes as management tools. Letters to vendors, staff recognition statements, memos, trade association correspondence, facility status updates, budget requests, and resident/volunteer celebrations have contained or been solely a function of poetic effort.

A poem in response to staff queries or emergent situations provides managers with an opportunity to communicate a message and demonstrate the humane side of the equation. For example, a memo to licensed staff regarding the need for a copy of their current license could take the form of a paycheck stuffer:

Sandra, your license renewal is due next month.
Please provide the office with a copy by 9/15.

Alternatively, a preprinted, generic “piece” using the same memo paper can convey the message in a more informal and supportive manner:

ON BEING ON TIME FOR LICENSE/
REGISTRATION RENEWING
This is simply a friendly reminder
that noted in your personnel binder
is the fact that your STATE REGISTRATION
expires with your birth celebration.
Surveyors, when finding these little glitches
become hysterics—baring fangs and twitches.
So this little task we’d like you to do—
Please bring us a copy of renewal that’s true.
We’ll place the proof in your personnel binder
for legal support and a survey that’s kinder.