

# FROM THE COACH'S DESK...

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## THE JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

In my nearly 20 years as an executive coach I have never been more focused on or grateful for the opportunity to support a leader on a mission to lead change.

By partnering with Dr. Walker, director of “Sonny” Montgomery Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Jackson, MS, for almost three years I have had the great privilege to better understand the challenges VA medical centers face, and in particular, one that is considered a “one-star” facility and placed on the high-risk list.

Dr. Walker selected me as his coach to pursue his goal of designing and implementing an effective organizational

change initiative that would restore the reputation of the Jackson medical center and make it the hospital of choice for Veterans in the area.

Over the recent years Dr Walker and his Pentad have systematically changed the culture by developing other leaders' ability to lead the desired culture change.

Their efforts have paid off.

The recent SAIL numbers resulted in the Jackson Medical center being removed from the high-risk list. Jackson is now officially a “two-star” facility and continuing its focus on getting everyone's commitment to create a culture of accountability and sustainable excellence.

One thing I've learned coaching hundreds of senior executives:

[An organization can't outperform the constraints of its leaders.](#)

In the Jackson VA, Dr. Walker and the Pentad have worked diligently to overcome their personal and organizational blindspots.



Dr. Walker himself has set an example by participating in rigorous, weekly coaching to become the best leader he can be and engaging his leaders in similar learning and growth opportunities.

In short, the Jackson VA has focused on creating a learning organization, where people want to work and feel safe to innovate and take risk.

When asked about the change he is leading, Dr Walker says: "I want to

develop an institution that is not dependent on its leader. One that is filled with leaders who are dedicated, dependable, and comfortable with making mistakes. And, when I leave one day, will continue to flourish."

About his leadership style and philosophy, Dr. Walker points out the importance of respect, being humble, and knowing that success is due to hard work and luck. He also believes that it is his role to own failures and shield others from some of the negative impact of mistakes. "It's not about putting the failures on others - it's about learning and committing to get better."

He adds, "Having high standards and high ownership has served me well. And so has my willingness to take advantage of a teaching moment. I like to connect with employees

and Veterans and tell stories to get my message across and make it more memorable."

During our coaching calls, Dr. Walker and I decided to focus the strategic development of leaders on three key areas in which leaders lead change and have impact:

1. **CLARITY ON STRATEGIC FOCUS, SHARED GOALS AND MEASURING OUTCOMES**
2. **COACHING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL LEADERS, MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS TO FULLY ENGAGE PEOPLE, LEVERAGE DIVERSITY, AND OPTIMIZE AND HARMONIZE INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM PERFORMANCE**
3. **COMMITMENT MANAGEMENT AS A FUNDAMENTAL PRACTICE FOR EVERY EMPLOYEE TO OBTAIN AND MANAGE PEOPLES' COMMITMENTS (INSTEAD OF THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES AND EXCUSES)**

Prior to the organization focusing on the 3C practices, I observed several meetings at the Jackson medical center and was struck by the lack of focus, urgency and commitment to action.

Now, three years later, I am walking through the building and see huddle board meetings in the hallway, engaged people,

actively debating, committing and solving problems with each other. The mood is positive, meetings are alive, less frequent, but more focused and productive.

Three years ago, I noticed resistance to change, lack of trust, cynicism, finger pointing and cliquish behaviors. Now, I am welcomed with open arms and feel peoples' trust, appreciation and desire to learn what I may be prepared to teach or coach them on.

People share more openly what is on their hearts and minds. They make requests of each other and take a stand for getting a commitment that can be managed. They focus their attention on desired outcomes instead of past events they can't change and speak commitment management language as we teach it in our book *Who Will Do What by When?*

Staff are willing to be coached out of their victim mindset (where they feel powerless over their circumstances) and into a player mindset that allows them to become part of the solution and commit to new and perhaps different actions. More people are feeling less stressed and report greater life balance.

The changes I observe in the VA Jackson culture are remarkable and nothing legitimizes them more than the recent SAIL number improvement.

Aside from focusing on culture change through leaders' development, Dr. Walker and his leadership team also used the

expertise of other coaches, central office staff and the VISN to help figure out what data to track, how to track it and make desired performance improvements.

By identifying the causes of existing execution gaps, people are better able to take a fresh look and figure out solutions. "Now we make sure that our meetings produce clear commitments to action and I am better informed about the various strategies in place to ensure patient safety and quality care. I feel good," says Dr. Walker with visibly greater ease.

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"WE WILL CONTINUE OUR EFFORTS TO GET AND MANAGE COMMITMENTS. THERE IS

MORE WE CAN LEARN AND DO TO BECOME BETTER AT THAT," DR. WALKER.

As his coach, I am happy too and knowing Dr. Walker's commitment to teaching, coaching and providing structures and frameworks that work, I have no doubt that the Jackson Medical center will become a model for effective transform-ational change, not just at the VA but within the government at large.

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