

Applying Lessons from Hollywood to Health Care: Managing the Intimidating Star

By Bobby Daly, MD, MBA

In this article...

Consider how some difficult-to-work-with movie stars and sports legends are handled and learn some ways to better control doctors with disruptive behaviors.



Dr. Jed Hill (Alec Baldwin):
The question is do I have a God complex?

Lawyer: Dr. Kessler says yes.

Dr. Jed Hill: Which makes me wonder if this lawyer has any idea as to the kind of grades one has to receive in college to be accepted at a top medical

school. If you have the vaguest clue as to how talented someone has to be to lead a surgical team. I have an MD from Harvard, I am board certified in cardio-thoracic medicine and trauma surgery, I have been awarded citations from seven different medical boards in New England, and I am never, ever sick at sea. So I ask you; when someone goes into a chapel and they fall on their knees and they pray to God that their wife doesn't miscarry or their daughter doesn't bleed to death or that their mother doesn't suffer acute neural trauma from postoperative shock, who do you think they're praying to? Now, go ahead and read your Bible, Dennis, and go to your church, and, with any luck, you might win the annual raffle, but if you're looking for God, he was in operating room number two on November 17, and he doesn't like to be second guessed. You ask me if I have a God complex. Let me tell you something: **I am God.**

Malice; Columbia Pictures, 1993¹

The blockbuster, *Malice*, portrays a narcissistic surgeon involved in a botched operation. Though played to hyperbole by Alec Baldwin, the arrogant physician archetype remains recognizable.

According to a survey by the American College of Physician Executives more than 95 percent of health care managers report encountering these potentially dangerous physician behaviors on a regular basis.² This conduct has significant consequences for a hospital's financial performance.

For example, according to one study, 49 percent of clinicians have felt pressured to dispense or administer a drug despite serious and unresolved safety concerns, and 40 percent have kept quiet rather than question a known intimidator.³

As health care leaders search for effective strategies, a key source of managerial expertise is the creative industries. As in health care, creative luminaries have power because of their tremendous revenue-generating ability.

Research by Harvard Business School professor, Anita Elberse, demonstrates that financial rewards for creative products are highly concentrated with stars. As an example, Elberse cites 2009 Nielsen Soundscan data of music sales that shows that 93 percent of all songs sell fewer than 100 copies, demonstrating that the majority of sales are by superstar musicians.⁴

Thus, creative executives face similar challenges—managing professionals possessing significant financial leverage. After reviewing several creative industry interventions, here are three strategies for consideration by health care executives to address the problem of the disruptive star physician.

The Tiger Woods strategy

In the wake of the Tiger Woods adultery scandal, golf veteran, Phil Mickelson, was asked by a reporter if he felt as if he needed to fill the void left by Woods in order to ensure the health of the golf industry.



Illustration by Micahel James White

Mickelson replied, “Nobody will be able to fill the shoes voided right now.”⁵ Woods’ absence and lackluster return have affected the golf world in many ways, most noticeably, ratings for an event drop nearly 50 percent when Woods is not playing.⁶

The popping of the Tiger bubble in the golf industry led *The New York Times* to recently ask, “Even if [Woods] does manage to dominate his sport again, will investors return to an enterprise whose fortunes have seemed so inextricably linked to a single brand?”⁵

In response the PGA has recently been actively promoting some of its more promising younger athletes like Rickie Fowler and Anthony Kim, hoping to become less dependent on a single player for financial success.⁵

An applicable lesson for hospital leaders is to recruit a constellation of stars, thus lessening the importance of any individual doctor and better positioning the manager to discipline conduct violations.

There might be other positive effects of this star system as well. A study of the film industry found that high-ability members perform better in the presence of other high-ability members.⁶

Medicine, like film, is a highly integrative process. Accordingly, one would expect multiple star physicians

to drive higher quality and safer services as they would be motivated to maintain the esteem of their talented peers and would be stimulated by ideas from talented colleagues.



Illustration by Micahel James White

The Tom Cruise strategy

In 2006, Sumner Redstone, the Chairman of Viacom, fired Tom Cruise after his conduct had become increasingly harmful to Paramount’s reputation.⁷

This behavior included jumping exuberantly on Oprah’s couch, assailing the actress Brooke Shields, and lashing out at reporters, including Matt Lauer. Redstone estimated that Cruise’s conduct had cost *Mission Impossible III* up to \$150 million in ticket sales.⁷

Negotiating a new deal with MGM, Cruise signed a contract that comprised an owner interest in United Artists. In reporting the deal, an entertainment analyst wrote, “The idea is that his ownership stake alone will align the interests of Tom Cruise the actor with Tom Cruise the studio grandee.”⁸

The contract’s architect, MGM chairman, Harry Sloan, believed that the proposed financial model would spread risk more equally between studio and talent.⁷ An implicit assumption behind the deal was that

Cruise would have a financial disincentive from behaving disruptively as it would negatively affect the studio’s returns and thus lessen the value of his equity position.

This innovative deal has implications for health care leaders. By allocating stars an ownership interest, managers incentivize them to provide high-quality customer service and retain their best colleagues.

This strategy has been successfully employed in the refractive eye surgery field. One participating surgeon concluded that this model changed his behavior to be more patient- and staff-focused because he learned the financial rewards of “pampering” his customers and team.⁹

While fields that are not procedure-based, such as psychiatry, might have difficulty enacting this ownership model, managers could create other financial incentives to motivate good behavior. Bonuses based on customer satisfaction scores or 360-degree evaluations could be used to ensure that star physicians are incentivized to behave appropriately.



Illustration by Micahel James White

The Charlie Sheen strategy

Charlie Sheen is the star of television’s most popular sitcom, “Two and a Half Men.”¹⁰ When not on TV, Sheen is often in the tabloids, includ-

ing for threatening his wife.¹¹

In response to Sheen's conduct, the network threw their support behind the actor, believing that his behavior could be rehabilitated and he could be a productive team member. At considerable cost, they shut down production for three weeks while the actor checked himself into rehab as a "preventative measure."¹²

Deemed by the blogosphere as "prehab," this strategy is aimed at addressing a behavioral issue before it becomes crippling.¹¹

Prehab is potentially an effective management strategy for health care. In a *New England Journal* article, Kahn notes that there is no systematic physician teaching of good manners.¹³ He proposes instruction on "etiquette-based medicine" in postgraduate training and targeted interventions, such as an etiquette check-list, for the particularly deficient practitioners.

By removing stars with behavioral warning signs from the clinic and educating them about conduct, a manager can prevent future behavioral crises.

With the passage of health care reform legislation, physician leaders will feel increasing pressure to decrease expenses and improve the quality of care. Addressing the issue of disruptive star physicians is critical as these physicians are associated with both higher costs and increased rates of preventable errors.

By taking the lessons learned from mass media and applying them at Mass General, health care leaders can better manage these talents and bring out their best performances.



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