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Book Review: *Questioning Protocol*

Written by Randi Redmond Oster

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In her recently released book, *Questioning Protocol*, Randi Redmond Oster, takes the reader on a harrowing journey as she navigates the healthcare system while helping her teenage son's battle with Crohn's disease. Seventeen chapters build a chronological story of success, frustration and failure in dealing with modern medicine and a healthcare industry that may appear foreign to the outsider.

Chapters such as *Martian Mom in the E.R.*, *Discovering the Root Cause* and *Figuring Failure Rate* set the stage for a unique narrative that combines both heart-felt emotion and sophisticated analytics based on Ms. Redmond Oster's 18-year career in General Electric. For example, she demonstrates how a Six Sigma quality tool, used to help make tough executive business decisions with multiple stakeholders, can be leveraged by patients and family members. The tool, which can easily be used by patients, ensures that complicated choices include all points of view. Ms. Redmond Oster used this tool with her son, who shared in the decision making, along with his doctor, in choosing a nutritional approach instead of medications to deal with his Crohn's condition.

Ms. Redmond Oster's background provides the foundation for her insightful healthcare observations. With a successful career as an engineer at GE, where she won numerous management awards including for one for her leadership of the design team for the stealth fighter electronic combat system, Ms. Redmond Oster learned that success is based on building high-performance teams to solve problems. She uses her process, efficiency and strategy skills to help understand the healthcare industry that is mired in outdated habits and may create victims of unfortunate preventable mistakes if some of the business tools she describes had been used. Her approach to problems, which are continually thrown at her, is eye-opening. Ms. Redmond Oster explains best practices in a simple, fast-paced and easy-to-grasp language.

At the end of each chapter Ms. Redmond Oster converts lessons learned into recommendations for dealing with the healthcare system. For example, in Chapter Five, *Balanced and Battle-Ready*, she suggests three action items that the reader can do:

1. **Talk to others with the disease. Listen to their story.** Ms. Redmond Oster suggests finding others who have successfully navigated life's journey with the disease.
2. **Ask WHY, say NO.** Ms. Redmond Oster explains how asking why reveals doctors' convictions about procedures and medications. "Say, No, until you're comfortable," she concludes.
3. **If something goes wrong, do not yell at the doctor.** Although the doctor made a mistake when administering steroids to her son without her permission, Ms. Redmond Oster takes the high road, using the incident to reinforce her mandate that all procedures and medications require her agreement in the decision.

In Chapter Seven, *Waiting for Emergency Surgery*, the author highlights six recommendations:

1. **Stock your overnight bag when you head the hospital.** This section includes a number of must haves when overnighing in the hospital.
2. **Help your loved one feel that they have some control.** Ms. Redmond Oster carefully helps her 15-year old son make decisions, so he doesn't feel like a victim of circumstance.
3. **Accept the fact that some of the processes seem redundant.** With her engineering background, Ms. Redmond Oster is sometimes frustrated at what she sees as inefficiencies, but she cautions against complaining about processes that may be difficult to change with we've-always-done-it-this-way mentality.
4. **Help your loved one not feel guilty about needing so much of your attention.** She suggests taking a day away from the hospital to recharge batteries and think strategically about the impending decisions.
5. **Forget the barking drill-sergeant technique.** Ms. Redmond Oster found that barking received less response than a supportive voice with suggestions.
6. **Take as much of the doctor's time that you need to gain clarity about the upcoming procedure.** Here Ms. Redmond Oster offers some of the best advice in the book, such as reviewing the consent form with the doctor,

asking about the performance record with the procedure, following up with questions about how the surgery went and documenting the conversation.

Each action item has one or two paragraphs that explain the recommendations with examples. The recommendations are so strong that they are worthy of a final chapter devoted exclusively to them.

Ms. Redmond Oster's heartbreaking tale, punctuated by her humorous wit, propels the narrative that is both colorful and exciting. *Questioning Protocol* is worth reading, not only for anyone facing hospitalization, but also for those in healthcare, so they gain an insider view to the patient perspective, as well as learn valuable lessons from the GE culture. Quoting lyrics from the song that Nat King Cole made famous, "Smile though your heart is aching," Ms. Redmond Oster acknowledges that sometimes "laughter is the best medicine."