



# Health Care Leadership: The Value of Proactively Preparing Employees for New Roles

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**H**ealth care organizations rely on skilled leaders to ensure patient safety, deliver quality care and develop a patient-centered workforce. However, many organizations don't have a defined process for identifying potential leaders and preparing them to succeed in these roles. Taking a proactive approach is essential. This is a hallmark of many successful health care institutions.

Leadership development in health care is important for several reasons:

- *Demographic changes:* The aging workforce means that senior leaders in health care organizations are retiring. These vacant positions are great opportunities for high performing employees, but the transition can be difficult if individuals haven't had experience managing others or thinking about issues in more strategic ways. High potential frontline leaders can benefit from access to developmental resources as a way to prepare for future advancement opportunities.
- *Quality of care:* According to The Joint Commission, leaders have a

direct influence over many of the factors that determine the level of safety and quality of care provided in health care organizations. These factors include the number of competent staff, ongoing evaluation and improvement of performance, and the workplace culture.<sup>1</sup>

- *Employee retention:* The 2015 HealthcareSource and ASHHRA Healthcare Workforce Executive Insights Survey found that "opportunities to advance" was ranked the most influential factor in retaining top health care talent. To maintain or increase retention levels for top talent, health care organizations must focus on initiatives that will develop future leaders.<sup>2</sup>
- *The need for a patient-centered workforce:* Patient-centered workforces are comprised of highly-engaged employees who always endeavor to provide patient-centered care. Leading health care organizations understand the importance of constantly assessing and developing competencies across both staff and leadership, establishing goals that

align with patient care, as well as the need to motivate the workforce with education and professional development opportunities.

### Assessing and building competencies

Succession planning is a common approach for developing a pipeline of up-and-coming leaders. However, The Advisory Board discovered that only 15 percent to 18 percent of leaders at best-in-class health care organizations have succession plans in place.<sup>3</sup> As health care institutions consider how to prepare employees for leadership roles and to build out succession plans, one good place to start is with an assessment of individuals' leadership competencies.

Successful health care leaders need to develop competencies in ten areas:

1. *Achievement orientation:* This is a desire to accomplish career aspirations and goals. In the health care industry, where science and technology are constantly evolving, it's critical that leaders possess a desire to evolve,

achieve more and inspire others to do the same.

2. *Conscientiousness*: This is the willingness to work hard and complete tasks and projects. Health care leaders must be able to inspire change despite potential resistance.
3. *Critical thinking*: This is the ability to reason through complex data and solve problems in an effective manner. Effective leaders objectively analyze situations, foresee possibilities and plan ahead.
4. *Customer orientation*: This is a genuine enjoyment of helping others and attending to the needs of external and internal customers. Customer orientation is essential as health care organizations look beyond patients and consider the entire consumer experience.
5. *Emotional evenness*: Leaders with this competency are calm, even-tempered and able to deal with stress.
6. *Innovative thinking*: Innovators are creative and willing to experiment with new ideas and approaches. The best leaders seek ways to implement enhanced practices in their health care systems.
7. *Multi-tasking*: This is the ability to work on multiple tasks or projects simultaneously. Prioritizing and working on multiple projects is crucial in the health care industry.
8. *Openness to change*: This is the ability to easily adapt to changing priorities, demands and work processes.
9. *Self-confidence*: Self-confident leaders have a positive self-image and are self-reliant. Self-confidence is important since health care leaders must feel comfortable making decisions on their own.
10. *Self-development*: This is a willingness to update and improve one's job-related skills and knowledge. Health

care leaders must be willing to go the "extra mile" to learn, maintain and enhance their job-related knowledge.

### Leveraging leadership assessment results

While assessment results add value during the hiring process, they are also useful during the performance evaluation and review process. Samaritan Health Services in Oregon's Mid-Willamette Valley uses assessment results when employees are promoted from a staff role to a managerial position. "We find that the results are helpful when evaluating critical thinking and employee potential, as well as strengths and opportunities for growth," said Amanda Morris, employment director at Samaritan Health Services.<sup>4</sup>

Once high potential employees understand their strengths and areas where they need to build skills, it is easier for organizations to identify learning opportunities that will create well-rounded leaders. Gaps in leadership competencies can be addressed in various ways. Online learning is a popular option, since it complements different learning styles and offers flexibility to health care workers who can't take time off the floor for classroom training.

Integrating performance evaluations, leadership assessments and learning systems makes it easier for health care organizations to create a structured and reliable leadership development process that supports continuous improvement. Since leadership development is an ongoing process, an infrastructure must be in place to continually assess leaders and then shift performance goals and development efforts to reflect growth and new development needs.

By focusing goals and development activities on behavioral competencies, managers can provide health care leaders with the real-time coaching and feedback needed for continuous improvement. While all leaders should be proficient in specific competencies, it's important to recognize that leadership development needs will be different for frontline leaders and

"senior" leaders. Frontline leaders are primarily responsible for managing people, whereas "senior" leaders deal primarily with operational processes and strategic plans. For example, to build the innovative thinking competency, frontline leaders might learn about understanding organizational change, while senior leaders might learn how to generate creative and innovative ideas by maximizing team creativity. On the other hand, for the multi-tasking competency, a frontline leader might learn about time management, while a senior leader might build skills related to establishing goals, roles and guidelines for teams.

### Conclusion

The pace of change in health care is unprecedented. To keep pace, health care organizations must proactively cultivate leaders that will provide continuity and also address new challenges that arise. Building a pipeline of leaders depends on a two-stage process: assessing promising employees' leadership competencies and then offering learning opportunities that target specific development needs. This can be accomplished by leveraging technology to support leadership development. Health care organizations that create a technology platform for performance evaluations, leadership assessments and learning systems will be well-positioned to stay one step ahead of demographic shifts and to create a patient-centered workforce committed to quality care.

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