

# Leader Profile



## Dennis W. Pullin, FACHE

President and CEO  
Virtua Health



A leader has to be seen as a credible messenger.

- Dennis W. Pullin



Witt/Kieffer is proud to have served Virtua Health in the recruitment of this executive.

### In Leadership, Passion Tops Perfection

Like many prominent leaders in healthcare, Dennis Pullin, FACHE, has been driven by a desire to help others, which he channels into a clear passion for his work as a chief executive. Leaders, Pullin believes, don't have to be perfect as long as they exhibit a genuine, unwavering commitment to peers, patients, and communities and pledge to learn and grow. Pullin is currently president and CEO of New Jersey-based Virtua Health, a position he assumed in 2017. Previously he had served as president of MedStar Harbor Hospital as well as other high-ranking roles at top health systems on the East Coast and in Texas. A native of San Antonio, Pullin is an active contributor to ACHE, for which he is a fellow and regent, as well as AHA and other industry organizations.

For the following conversation, Pullin was interviewed by Witt/Kieffer senior partner Rachel Polhemus.

**Q: How did you become a leader? What's been your recipe for professional growth and success?**

**Pullin:** From the beginning of my career I found something I could be passionate about - that was the business of healthcare. I have always been inspired by the work that I do as a leader in a profession that makes a difference in people's lives. From this foundation I invested the time and energy to prepare myself, learning as much as I could and developing those areas in which I wasn't as strong as I wanted to be. Along the way I have been lucky to work with many great people. And so for me as a leader, the stars aligned.

The recipe for my professional growth has been learning how to be an effective communicator as well as ensuring that I have always had a solid message to communicate. I truly subscribe to the belief that a leader has to be seen as a credible messenger to others. I have had many successes and failures over the years, and therefore am able to speak to others from a position of true authenticity.

**Q: Who has influenced you and helped you along the way?**

**Pullin:** Many people have been impactful to me as a leader—two in particular who were the most influential leaders I've had the opportunity to work with: Jack Lynch [president and CEO of Main Line Health] and Ken Samet [president and CEO of MedStar Health]. Both are passionate, authentic leaders. They also have the rare ability to keep even the most complex things simple - they communicate in a way that others can understand them and feel "in the moment" with them. I watched both of them as leaders, and saw their dedication to making a difference in the communities they served. Through them I learned what kind of leader I wanted to be.

I have also taken note of individuals who I didn't consider strong leaders or were not passionate about their work. For me it has been just as important to learn from people who did not represent the kind of leader that I wanted to be.

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Be part of an ecosystem that creates change.

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**Q:** What's the fundamental challenge that leaders in healthcare are grappling with today? How are you responding from your position as Virtua CEO?

**Pullin:** I think the fundamental challenge for healthcare leaders today is tremendous uncertainty – at the federal, state and even cascading to the local level. It is important to make sure that you have a strategy that is sustainable regardless of the fundamental regulatory and political changes that take place. You can't be paralyzed. So you need a strategy that is purposeful and serves your community and organization, but one that has some nimbleness, too, in the event that you have to course correct due to market shifts or changes at the federal and state levels.

**Q:** Are you a role model? What are your responsibilities toward other professionals in the industry?

**Pullin:** I don't consider myself a role model but rather an example of someone who invests in himself, works hard, has had some luck, and has succeeded. A measure of the example that I am setting for others is provided by my son, who is going to graduate school to work in healthcare and is absolutely committed to a career in this industry. This shows me that I have demonstrated that healthcare leadership is a meaningful career path through which one can make a considerable contribution to people and communities. Part of being a leader is committing time to mentoring and developing young professionals to prepare them for a career in this field.

**Q:** What's the best career advice you've ever gotten?

**Pullin:** First, as a professional, "Learn to manage your manager" – meaning that you have to understand the environment that you work in, who you work for, and understand their goals and priorities. You can't expect everything to be all about you. Then, together, be part of an ecosystem that creates change.

For job candidates, my advice is to make yourself different than the other 300 people that want the same job as you. What makes you unique such that you would be considered the most suitable candidate? I always try to do things that would help me stand out versus stick out. For example, there is a lot of consolidation in the healthcare marketplace – as a result, I studied and got my securities license years ago so I had the ability to syndicate deals myself. It's an example of something that got me noticed.

**Q:** Finally, please complete the following phrase: "Good leadership requires . . ."

**Pullin:** Passion and authenticity. We are all going to make mistakes or stumble, either because of our own gaps or because we are working with imperfect information. If you are passionate and authentic, you learn to draw from knowledge, success and mistakes in order to make the right decisions. And then people will be more apt to follow and forgive you even if every decision isn't the exact right one.

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