Great Expectations: What Makes a Rising Star?

A Witt/Kieffer Survey of Past and Present Modern Healthcare Up and Comers
What makes a rising star in healthcare? What should the industry do now to develop high caliber talent for the future?

Witt/Kieffer posed these and similar questions to nearly 300 award-winning leaders who have been named *Modern Healthcare* Up and Comers in the 26 years since the program was created. As a 15-year program co-sponsor, we recently surveyed this group of stellar executives — including 127 who are current CEOs — about what they think makes a successful Up and Comer today, and what matters most to successful professional development. We also asked winners, past and present, about the impact of receiving the Up and Comer distinction on their own career progression. The survey received a response rate of 24 percent.
Mandate for the young leader: ‘Get things done’

Getting things done, excellent communication and interpersonal skills, critical thinking and effective decision-making are what matter most in young healthcare leaders today, according to Modern Healthcare Up and Comer survey respondents who were asked about the most important characteristics to look for in rising stars. As the healthcare delivery model rapidly morphs, these distinguished executives urge emerging leaders to act decisively and make things happen.

Achieving results, making measurable contributions and maintaining personal integrity are all key to a young leader’s success, respondents say. Emerging talent must have a “willingness to work with others — particularly physicians,” advises one Up and Comer. “The new dynamic requires more collaborative and shared decision-making than previously needed.” Suggests another award winner “If you do not have a clinical background, spend some time in the clinical areas to really understand what is going on. By doing this you will be more easily able to connect the dots and be an effective leader.”

Furthermore, the best executives should have the “ability to translate complex financial and operational issues into simple, easy to understand concepts that are compelling, but not burdened with too much detail,” one respondent indicates.

Build physician and employee relationships; patient-centered culture

In terms of skills, knowledge and experience, what’s most important is that young healthcare leaders cultivate relationships with employees first, improve patient safety second and build a patient-centered culture, third. Also critical are the ability to cultivate relationships with physicians, understand best practices to enhance quality of care and cultivate relationships with community/business leaders. Other factors cited include recruiting, retaining, coaching and developing top talent at the management level; building teams and prioritizing ways to provide the best care possible.

“My determination to implement changes in the healthcare delivery system led me to take on many challenges. When you are a change agent, you take risks — and people notice.”

- 2010 Up and Comer, CEO of healthcare information technology supplier

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Percentage answering Strongly Agree/Agree
When asked about factors that matter most to their personal success, Up and Comer respondents rate cultivating relationships with employees number one (96 percent strongly agree/agree), followed by cultivating physician relationships (92 percent), cultivating relationships with community/business leaders (90 percent) and understanding best practices to improve quality of care (87 percent). Identifying new sources of revenue (87 percent) is the next most important contributor to personal success, no doubt due to relentless financial pressure on healthcare organizations and their leaders. Cultivating board relationships (86 percent) is another important factor.

**KEY TO UP AND COMER SUCCESS**

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“Passionately seize the opportunity when radical new changes arise in the healthcare industry and consider (their) strategic and operational impact,” urged one respondent. As examples, this individual cites over time the introduction of PCs, transition to DRGs, managed care, capitation and now ACOs. Another Up and Comer says it was important to his/her own success to “take risk and not worry about losing my job. Leaders need to focus on organization first, self second.”

**Mentor and stretch rising stars**

Mentoring is the most effective way to develop young executive talent, according to 99 percent of the responding Up and Comers who strongly agree/agree. That’s followed by providing exposure to the Board and stakeholders (96 percent), giving individuals stretch assignments (94 percent), encouraging potential leaders to broaden their knowledge base (90 percent), and rotating through different positions within an organization (88 percent).

“I want to doubly emphasize mentoring and coaching,” says one respondent, “and having a network of peers who you can strategize with, discuss important issues with and who are as passionate as you are about healthcare for all.” Another Up and Comer points young leaders to
“stretch assignments that allow them to fail yet enable themselves to develop Plan B to return to success (allow them to learn from their mistakes).” More leadership development advice includes getting involved in professional associations such as ACHE at both the local and national level.

As living proof, the award winners cite mentoring as the best opportunity they had to develop as a healthcare leader (88 percent strongly agree/agree). Exposure to the Board and stakeholders (86 percent) is second in terms of coming into their own as an acknowledged leader. That’s followed by stretch assignments (84 percent); obtaining an advanced degree (84 percent); and encouraging potential leaders to broaden their knowledge base (82 percent).

Other factors contributing to the Up and Comers’ success: an administrative residency, running a subsidiary and serving on Boards of other organizations. Finally, one Up and Comer explains that a new perspective can be a powerful contributor to one’s growth as a leader and change agent. “Returning temporarily to caring directly for patients has opened my eyes to the innumerable opportunities to improve healthcare outside of the hospital.”

“It’s not about title and age, it’s about measurable contributions.”

- 2009 Up and Comer, C-suite executive at an academic medical center
Being an Up and Comer advances careers

Recognition as a Modern Healthcare Up and Comer made a profound difference in the careers of the majority of survey respondents. Seventy-six (76) percent strongly agree/agree that being named an Up and Comer provided them greater credibility as a healthcare leader, and 65 percent said being named a winner helped advance their career. “I have experienced progressive career growth in my organization since the time I was recognized as an Up and Comer in 2006,” said one respondent. “Since 2006, (I) have progressed in my career from CFO to Hospital President and now to Corporate EVP/COO.”

Far fewer, only 41 percent, said they are recognized as an Up and Comer to this day. “It has been a long time but I do believe there was career value within the first five years of the recognition,” said one respondent. However, nearly two-thirds or 64 percent of respondents have the same career aspirations as they did when they received the award. Many had aspired to and have since taken on CEO roles.

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents say the characteristic or experience that contributed most to their being named an Up and Comer has been instrumental to their growth as a leader (93 percent strongly agree/agree). One respondent attributes winning the award to a “willingness to participate in state hospital association activities, boards and task forces, thus building relationships with many individuals across the healthcare industry. Another observes, “Being both a patient and employee advocate. This was accomplished by developing a culture predicated on strong values and commitment to serving the hospital’s mission.” Other factors that led to becoming an Up and Comer include working with a great team, moving early into a CEO role, willingness to take risk, being a physician executive and exhibiting passion at work.

“As we enter into a time of great change in healthcare, it can been seen as exciting or paralyzing. I’m thankful that I can focus people and motivate them to believe in the change and our organization’s plan.”

- 2004 Up and Comer, hospital vice president
About the respondents

Twenty-five (25) percent of the Modern Healthcare Up and Comer respondents are between the ages of 41-45, 20 percent are between 46-50 and another 20 percent are 56-60. Fifty-seven percent are male, while 43 percent are female. Thirty-one (31) percent were CEOs, 28 percent were in other C-suite roles and 16 percent were vice presidents when they received the award. Today, 40 percent are CEOs, 22 percent hold other C-suite positions and 4 percent are VPs.

About Modern Healthcare's Up and Comers Recognition Program

Each year, Modern Healthcare honors rising young stars 40 years of age or younger who have made significant contributions in healthcare administration, management or policy. Witt/Kieffer has been proud to partner with Modern Healthcare for the past 15 years to recognize the young leaders shaping the future of healthcare.
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Nantucket, MA
Bethesda, MD
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