

Healthcare executives: 20 steps to advance your career

By Carson F. Dye, FACHE and Kurt Vining

Moving ahead to increasingly higher senior management team positions is a dream for some healthcare executives — and a reality for others. Many potentially successful executives fail to climb the executive ladder because they never prepare themselves for the next step in their careers.

Healthcare professionals can advance in their careers, but only if they position themselves for success. From our experience as former healthcare human resource professionals and current executive search consultants, here are our perspectives on attaining career advancement:

1. Leaders plan to win.

They do so by looking forward to what is on the career opportunity horizon, leading a team and stressing their maturity in healthcare management. They are broad management generalists who remain flexible enough to withstand the pressures of change by using whichever skills, traits and management styles are necessary to succeed. They plan, network, participate and benchmark. Above all, they believe they will win a job that meets their requirements for challenge, compensation and future success.

2. Overcome the common barriers to success.

Frequently, executives fail in career advancement because they prepare poorly for their next job and burn bridges rather than focus on positive outcomes. Others fail to quantify the results of their

professional performance and place little priority on networking or joining professional associations that can help build their experience levels. Still others remain rudderless and have no personal mission, while others wrap themselves in internal matters and fail to grow or even become technologically proficient.

3. Put your plan in writing.

Write the ways in which you plan to win the next step in advancing your career. Prepare a written “personal mission statement” and memorize it. Use it to show your uniqueness in the marketplace. Be ready to convince executive search consultants, search committees and potential bosses that you offer skills, traits and experiences that surpass those of your competitors and match perfectly with the needs of the organization.

4. How will you learn about new opportunities, stay active in the market and network with others?

Joining professional organizations is an ideal way to hear about new opportunities, gain experience and enhance your professional references. Don't simply join but be an active committee member who keeps abreast of the healthcare industry, advances committee work and enlists the support of committee members or chairpersons.

5. If you learn about a career opportunity that interests you, interview for it.

If it has been 20 years since your last interview, you may need to enhance your comfort level with the interview process once again. Be serious about the interview. Use it to boost your abilities and to learn about compensation,

benefits, responsibilities and future challenges. As always, the interview can lead to your next career opportunity.

6. Plan to network not only with your peers but also with those who are able to hire you.

Get to know senior management team leaders through events of the American College of Healthcare Executives or other healthcare associations. These key contacts — CEOs, COOs and trustees, for example — will know about openings within the senior levels of their organization. And they may be in a position to recommend you for an interview.

7. Position yourself for success through professional development.

A 2001 Witt/Kieffer confidential survey discovered members of the American Hospital Association's American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration position themselves for success by: (1) focusing on industry changes/trends; (2) attending continuing education programs/courses; (3) networking with colleagues; (4) creating goals, objectives and tactics; (5) attending local/regional HR networking luncheons; (5) getting facts, using intuition and drawing conclusions; and (6) reassessing personal development goals. Which of the previously mentioned tactics do you use?

8. Understand how retained executive search firms work.

These firms represent the healthcare client, not the candidate. If you receive calls from retained executive search consultants, know their ethical and legal obligations rest with the healthcare client. If you fit any of the position specifications a consultant mentions to you, you will be considered for the position. If you are interested, submit your resume to the consultant. Candidates expressing interest in the status of a search should occasionally query the consultant by email rather than making multiple telephone calls.

9. Rely on search consultants.

They know about senior-level healthcare positions and can assist you in advancing your career. If a search consultant calls you about a position for which you lack interest, return the call anyway and offer the consultant the names of two or three colleagues or friends. If you develop professional relationships with search consultants before you actually need their help, chances are better they'll respond to your needs and requests. Even if you are uninterested in a specific position, ask the consultant about compensation for the job. That's an easy way to learn about marketplace salaries and benefits within specific fields and positions.

10. Get your resume in order.

Everyone knows this is important, but few take the time to make it right. The "two-page rule" is no longer an acceptable guideline for professional resumes, especially for those leaders with 10 years or more of executive experience. Many professionals extend their resume to at least four pages and use addenda for specific information — say, a list of published articles or a case history of a healthcare turnaround that the executive engineered.

11. Learn the nuts and bolts of resume style.

In today's world of email, it's mandatory to have your resume on a computer file that can easily be emailed. A resume "hard copy" should be laser printed on white paper. Use 12-point font and lots of white space as the major design elements on the resume. Avoid graphics, shading, italics, underlining and bold or fancy typefaces — and typos. Proofread your resume, set it aside for a day or two and proofread it again. Make certain your resume is easy to read, photocopy, email and scan electronically.

12. List key achievements and measurable results on the resume.

The fact of the matter is, listing a vice president title and responsibilities will make the prospective employer sit up

and say, “So what?” You must differentiate yourself by featuring key, measurable accomplishments and achievements. What counts is that you meet your targets by, say, 25 percent; reduce expenses 12 percent; enhance productivity 8 percent; and boost employee satisfaction by 18 percent. Then, explain how you achieve and measure success.

13. Keep the traditionally important aspects of resumes.

List chronologically the position title, organization name, description of organization, organization location and dates of employment. Include graduation dates, personal activities and special honors that make you distinct. Don’t include a professional objective, as it may be inappropriate for the position. Don’t include “references available upon request.” Of course they are, so why waste the space?

14. Honesty is key.

Exaggeration and hyperbole have no place on resumes. Resumes must be truthful and factual in every way. Professionals who believe they can make false claims without being caught are fooling themselves. Both healthcare employers and executive search firms screen candidate backgrounds and references extensively to ensure education,

employment and professionalism match the resume details.

15. Effective interviewing begins with a telephone call.

You may hear about a position from a prospective employer or executive search consultant who calls you at work. The telephone call will help the employer or consultant determine your interest in the position. You gain the caller’s attention by providing a brief career overview and featuring your personal mission statement. Then, follow up by emailing your updated resume to the caller.

16. Typically, you will participate in an in-depth telephone conversation before the initial in-person interview.

During this second phase of interviewing, focus on your accomplishments. Discuss your measurable results and your potential “fit” or “chemistry” for the job.

17. Perform essential homework to win the job.

Learn all you can about the organization as well as its mission, vision, values, goals, objectives and business/clinical units. Know the key job responsibilities and first-year goals. Keep a running list of questions for discussion, and update your list as you move through the interview process. Use the Web to learn about the

organization and to find articles about it. Know the names and positions of key executives of the organization. What are the organization’s strengths and weaknesses?

18. At the interview, discuss your abilities and interpersonal skills.

Portray yourself as the best among the candidates for the job. Arrive early. In fact, some executives arrive a day early to see the organization in action. Be well rested and well prepared for your interview. Talk to everyone you see, including administrative assistants whose opinion often constitutes a vote for or against you. Bring along with you organizational charts and documents that speak volumes, but reduce the need for long-winded background discussions that fail to feature your measurable accomplishments. Strike a balance between talking and listening. Be positive and courteous. Also, be ready to answer these questions: What is your leadership style? What do you do best? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What do others say about you?

19. Know what the prospective employer really wants from you.

Make it clear you’ve “been there, done that.” Express that you have achieved some or all of the specific objectives

that must be completed. Focus on your personal and team fit for the job, as well as the broad business knowledge only you bring to the table.

20. Negotiate the offer successfully.

After you've proved you're the best candidate for the job, you can then work toward negotiating an offer you can accept. Even if the organization fails to match your compensation requirements, you can work around salary caps by negotiating sign-on, six-month or guaranteed bonuses, or by being added to the payroll early. Employment contracts and severance arrangements are additional components to discuss at the negotiation table. By knowing the market and responding quickly to an offer, you put yourself in the best position to advance your career.

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