

Becoming a Physician Executive: Suggestions for Taking the Natural Next Step

By Jason Petros, Consultant

Within healthcare, the demand for physician leaders continues to trend upward. Physician executive jobs are plentiful, and yet despite this high demand there is a small pool of physician leaders with the experience and skills required to succeed in various executive positions. A vacuum waits to be filled by doctors who can develop the appropriate characteristics and resume to thrive in this environment.

The good news is that the leap that physicians must take into executive roles is not as great as they might think. Potential physician leaders encounter a multitude of opportunities, some of which do not require additional schooling or certification. Stepping into these new roles can be done quickly and successfully.

Would-be physician executives can take note of a few trends and observations that I hear about as I speak to other physician leaders in various roles and organizations. These include:

Physicians are ready for leadership. They are intrinsically fast learners, are extremely outcome-driven, have high expectations, and an unparalleled work ethic. They are comfortable with responsibility and decision making. In other words, they already have executive leadership skills. These attributes have made them successful in solo practices or small team environments, and can be leveraged for success in the executive suite.

Leadership opportunities exist within one's own organization. The journey to a major leadership role begins within your current workplace. While formal physician leadership roles in hospitals and health systems can be limited, there are often informal paths that can be taken. Physicians who see themselves as up-and-coming leaders need to put themselves in positions of strength to effect measurable change. Good places to seek this out are the organization's quality committee, process improvement committee, or pharmaceutical and therapeutic committee. Participation in these informal roles is an outstanding way to become exposed to the dynamics of organizational politics, budgeting, operational best practices and dealing with different personalities.

Initiating a leadership role can go a long way. Taking the lead on project-based initiatives—such as spearheading EMR implementation, helping to develop a more clinically integrated delivery system, or working with leadership on process improvement activities—provides valuable experience. Physicians should

also visit the American College of Physician Executives website (www.acpe.org) and consider becoming a Certified Physician Executive (CPE) as another avenue to gain leadership experience and enhance their resumes.

It helps to develop “softer” skills along the way. There is no magic formula when it comes to outstanding leadership but there are some skills, such as collaboration and communication, which can help tremendously as you grow in your role. As the industry and the customer base demand more integration between departments and enterprises, so will our physician leaders. After all, team-based healthcare delivery is known for its consistently high quality. Two cornerstones of integration are communication and collaboration.

Collaboration is earning employee engagement and buy-in through influence, not through a direct reporting relationship. Collaborative healthcare is not “my way or the highway”; rather, the approach is more, “let’s all sit down at the table and see how we can work together to solve this problem.” A physician involved in committee work gains exposure to different personalities, specialties, departments and experiences, and learns to be empathetic to differences and sympathetic to similarities with their colleagues.

Communication is a skill that we all have developed throughout our lives and yet we all can improve upon. It is imperative for leaders to listen to, educate, and set clear expectations for other members of the team. The aforementioned informal leadership roles can help physicians enhance their communication skills before hitting the big stage.

A talent development strategy

While the number of physicians fully prepared to assume executive leadership roles is modest, demand for their services will only continue to grow. Physicians who wish to become physician executives can take that next step with hard work and initiative — which should come easy to them — and a strategic focus on developing all-important soft skills.

About the Author

Jason Petros is a consultant based in Witt/Kieffer’s Oak Brook office. Since joining the firm in 2007, Jason has developed an extensive understanding of healthcare leadership and the executive search process. He has been instrumental in the successful placement of key leaders in integrated health systems, academic medical centers, community hospitals, physician groups, and other healthcare services organizations.

For more information, contact: jasonp@wittkieffer.com.

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