

DEVELOPING A PHYSICIAN LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

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In the ever-changing world of healthcare there is a growing need for physician leaders. Whether implementing EMR/EHR, meeting the requirements of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), or leading a growing, diverse medical staff, doctors are assuming a larger role. However, there is little in the way of purposeful, structured leadership development for physicians.

Many organizations choose physician leaders for their technical skills or simply their physician status. Leadership is its own skill set. A physician with in-depth knowledge and experience in health information technology does not necessarily possess the skills needed to lead the enormous responsibility of implementation and useful adoption of EHR. Likewise, physicians chosen to lead a medical staff or employed provider network may possess the requisite clinical skills but may not know how to build and lead a team, inspire a vision, and lead others toward implementation of that vision.

Too often organizations, and healthcare is no exception, recruit the best widget-maker to lead other widget makers but leadership is not widget-making – it is a completely different skill set. Anyone in a leadership position without strong leadership skills often does more harm than good – including physicians.

WHAT SHOULD HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS LOOK FOR WHEN RECRUITING TOP TALENT FOR PHYSICIAN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS?

Strategic leadership skills – The ideal candidate for any leadership position knows how to see the big picture and develop strategy that leads his or her team forward toward a vision of the future. However, visions seen only by leaders are not enough to make a significant change within an organization. Commitment cannot be ordered; it must be inspired. As Rupesh Roy, product manager at NetLogic Microsystems said, “You need to have clear goals and a vision to make a positive difference, and you have to be able to share that vision with others and get them to believe in it.”

Communication skills – One of the key ways a leader shares his or her vision with others is by communicating openly, honestly, and often. Leaders have to be able to help others see and feel how alignment with the vision serves their own interests, needs, and aspirations. We’re not talking about holding staff meetings or sending emails or including the vision in the corporate newsletter – although those are all relevant and important. Communicating the vision is about passion. Enthusiasm and expressiveness are among the strongest leadership skills for an organization that wants to perform better tomorrow than it did yesterday.

Relationship-building – In today’s evolving healthcare environment relationship building skills are essential for effective physician leaders. These relationships are not only needed with other clinical and hospital executives/stakeholders, but with outside vendors, community influencers, foundations, patients, regulatory organizations, and managed care organizations (just to name a few). The physician’s ability to build trust, communicate effectively, and get to know these other stakeholders is critical. The leader needs to be “seen” and develop a presence with these individuals, while helping to make sure win/win partnerships and alliances are put in place.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

There are generally two methods for organizations to find “the right” leadership. They can recruit physician leaders when there is a void from other organizations or develop talent internally. We believe that a combination of these two methods will achieve the best results.

Finding new talent in the market place can be costly, time consuming, require an understanding of how to match recruitment with organizational culture, and how to conduct proactive recruitment. Often organizations don’t have the capacity to handle this level of recruitment, which can take up to four months of intense work. This means if they want to recruit from outside the organization they most likely will need to hire a retained search firm to conduct the search.

One of the biggest challenges organizations face is crafting an effective leadership development and succession plan. Having a plan for both, ensures the organization can be proactive, instead of reactive, in placing their next physician leader. Identifying a model of the ideal physician leader and assessing the pool of possible candidates will highlight the current highest potential achievers. Healthcare organizations must have a way to ensure those identified as future leaders have the necessary soft and hard skills to move into a leadership role.

The skills and aptitudes needed to lead must be defined by the organization’s key stakeholders. The executive team must take time to understand their medical staff needs, as well as the needs of the entire organization and its partners. In addition, they must implement an on-going training program and additional outside executive/industry education for physician leaders on a regular basis. Most importantly, the organization must develop a mentorship program where potential future leaders are paired with successful physician leaders within their own organization (or other organizations) so they can learn and develop. Effective leadership skills do not just happen, they require nurturing and ongoing development.

Besides developing leaders internally, an organization must also continually develop relationships with key physician leaders in the industry. In other words, “always be recruiting.” Knowing where top talent is and what other organizations look for in their physician leaders should be a key factor in recruitment strategy. Organizations that build relationships with key physician leaders, ensure they maintain a pipeline of candidates for future recruiting needs. These relationships also allow a relevant comparison of national talent with the organization’s own existing talent pool, aiding in better recruiting decisions. Employing both an internal leadership development program and external recruitment focus are the building blocks for developing a successful physician leadership strategy.

To learn more about how Coker can help you craft or enhance your leadership development strategy, call 678-832-2021 to speak with Stefan Werdegar, Vice President or Jill Lewis, Consultant.

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