

The New Health Care Leader

By Deedra Hartung

It's no longer enough for a hospital executive to be able to trim costs without affecting quality. The health care leader of today also needs to quickly adopt new technologies, possess clinical expertise, manage a diverse team and motivate employees.



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In the 1990s, hospital executives focused on restructuring and reengineering their organizations for greater efficiency. They scrambled to cope with cutbacks in federal funding while attempting to minimize their effects on quality. Executives demonstrating skills in these areas were in high demand.

Today, the leadership skill set sought by future-oriented hospital organizations has shifted dramatically. This does not mean that financial acumen and operational expertise are no longer needed or important: An ability to accomplish more with less continues to matter a great deal. But a much wider range of skills in leadership, communications and managing technological change are increasingly essential. ([See the sidebar below.](#))

This shift is being fueled by rapid technological developments as well as demographic changes, and it is transforming the health care marketplace overnight. Tomorrow's hospital leaders must be adept at incorporating new technology, have clinical expertise, be able to lead a diverse group of stakeholders and be skilled at motivating employees.

Advanced Technology Skills

It took 10 years before the business world universally accepted e-mail. By 21st-century standards, a decade will be considered an eternity. Identifying and adopting new health care technologies will soon seem to occur overnight.

Dramatic leaps forward in medical informatics and costly new medical technologies that redefine the state of the art in health care quality are now commonplace. Visiting a Web site such as www.ihealthbeat.com, which presents information on new health care technologies, is a sobering experience. Innovative organizations such as the Leapfrog Group are pushing organizations to new heights in quality initiatives.

Managing technological decision-making and implementation at a rapid pace will be a key skill for tomorrow's health care managers.

Clinical Expertise

The effective health care leader of tomorrow will possess broad interdisciplinary knowledge. Executives and executive teams will have clinical as well as operational expertise. Leadership teams will be equally versed in management, medicine and technology in order to develop new product lines or businesses and to improve or expand existing hospital services. Greater physician involvement in management decision-making will require that nonmedical executives be able to communicate well with clinical managers, understand physicians' perspectives and effectively involve them in decision-making.

To bring clinical expertise to an executive team, an increasing number of hospital systems are considering physician executives or other clinicians with strong technological knowledge for many high-level positions. In many cases, they are experts in medicine, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, medical informatics, and quality and performance improvement.

Without such clinical expertise, leaders of a hospital organization may not be able to quickly recognize or evaluate emerging trends in health care. They may be ill equipped to identify, fund and capitalize on the most promising new technologies or processes that are driving trends.

Increasingly, market advantage for a hospital organization means knowing how and when to strategically invest a hospital's capital in high-risk, high-reward breakthrough technologies, or having the expertise to engineer and drive state-of-the art quality initiatives. Strategic success requires in-depth knowledge of technology, clinical processes and medicine, combined with business and operational expertise.

Leading Diversity

Effective health care leadership teams of tomorrow will be diverse in disciplines, management philosophy and racial and cultural makeup. High-level leadership skills will be necessary to draw such diverse groups into effective management teams that use each member's expertise effectively.

Great teams do not have leaders who think alike, look alike or even act alike. Great health care teams must become executive think tanks. Diversity breeds cutting-edge creativity and innovative action. Teams and leaders who allow for debate, calculated risk taking, and divergent style and thought bring the meaning of diversity and innovation to a new level. Organizations whose leadership teams function as executive think tanks will rise to new heights of quality and success.

Motivating Employees

During the 1990s, talent for motivating subordinates was a crucial part of the skill set of hospital leaders. Motivation is still a crucial skill set, but one that requires new methods.

Senior executives who served as cheerleaders and inspired subordinates had a place in the slower-paced, less-volatile health care economy. That is no longer the case. Hospital organizations that seek to promote a collaborative spirit among cross-functional teams, promote core values and surmount obstacles to realize their missions need more than cheerleaders. They need executives who project competence that inspires faith throughout the organization in their ability to steer the ship through turbulent waters.

The prototype for the effective new-economy leader is the current secretary of state, Colin Powell. Powell's quality of intellect, integrity and competence shines through his quiet, civilized and dignified persona and commands immense respect. Today, it is not just about how smart you are, but how you use your intelligence. The ability to *project* diplomacy yet *influence* direction, vision and organizational culture becomes the glue that binds the organization into one team with one goal: to deliver excellence in patient care.

Hospital leaders of the future must encourage a culture of innovation, one that begins with the leadership team and flows through the entire organization. Encouraging proactive agendas for solutions, services and processes; rewarding risk taking and entrepreneurial thinking; and promoting knowledge transfer and environmental scanning for innovative processes is a whole new way of leading. Innovative thinking, innovative technology and innovative practices are required to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Leaders must be innovators themselves to support this new culture throughout their organizations. One forward-thinking hospital organization has added an innovation portal to its corporate intranet to demonstrate its commitment to innovation at every level of the organization. Support for idea development, entrepreneurial thinking, risk-taking and adoption of innovative approaches to every facet of patient care will result in effective solutions to the challenging situations that the future will bring.

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Sidebar:

A Hospital Self-Assessment

Senior or chief health care executives should ask themselves the following questions to determine their leadership needs:

- Are the leaders in my organization capable of meeting changing parameters?
- Does the leadership team need an infusion of new talent with different skills or capabilities?
- Should current leaders undergo intensive assessment to determine training needs?
- What talents, traits and skills should a hospital organization now seek in members of management teams to ensure tomorrow's success?

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