

# Experienced Executives Offer Head-to-Toe Advice



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Ten years ago, when our firm was asked to recruit a CEO or executive vice president and we asked the search committee if they would consider a physician, the answer was generally, “Sure, we’ll consider a physician, but we really need someone with a lot of experience in strategy, finance and operations.” The unsaid ending of that sentence was, “We don’t think physicians have those skills.”

Five years ago, when we posed the same question, we heard more often, “We want to look at physicians and non-physicians.”

Most recently we hear, “We’d like you to help us recruit a CEO; we want a physician but we’ll consider non-physician talent, as well.”

The growing demand for physicians to fill senior executive and key leadership roles marks a shift in how the industry views and values these leaders. Physicians who have a passion for leadership and are committed to bolstering their business management skills are sought after for competitive executive positions. Possessing both medical and business training is a powerful combination that can be successfully leveraged in the current health care environment.

Many physician executives are already serving at the top of the industry. And, even industry-leading physician executives made the transition to leadership from a practicing physician role. They honed their natural leadership skills and abilities. They broadened their focus to become valued business strategists, team members and decision makers. Their experiences offer a wealth of knowledge to help physicians preparing to embark on the path to the executive suite.

Cejka Executive Search has gathered observations and advice from seven top physician leaders who are leading organizations in a wide variety of sectors within the health

care industry. Their backgrounds include integrated delivery systems, large physician groups, academic medical centers, managed care organizations, faith-based systems and for-profit, long-term hospital systems.

Although each physician has followed a unique career path, our discussions revealed insights that speak to a number of attributes consistently present in the “anatomy” of a physician leader.

## Maintain a healthy heart

Although everyday duties and tasks will change as a physician transitions to a leadership role, it’s important that his or her professional focus stays true. Susan L. Freeman, MD, MS, chief medical officer for Temple University Hospital, believes strongly that a successful leader maintains his or her core values.

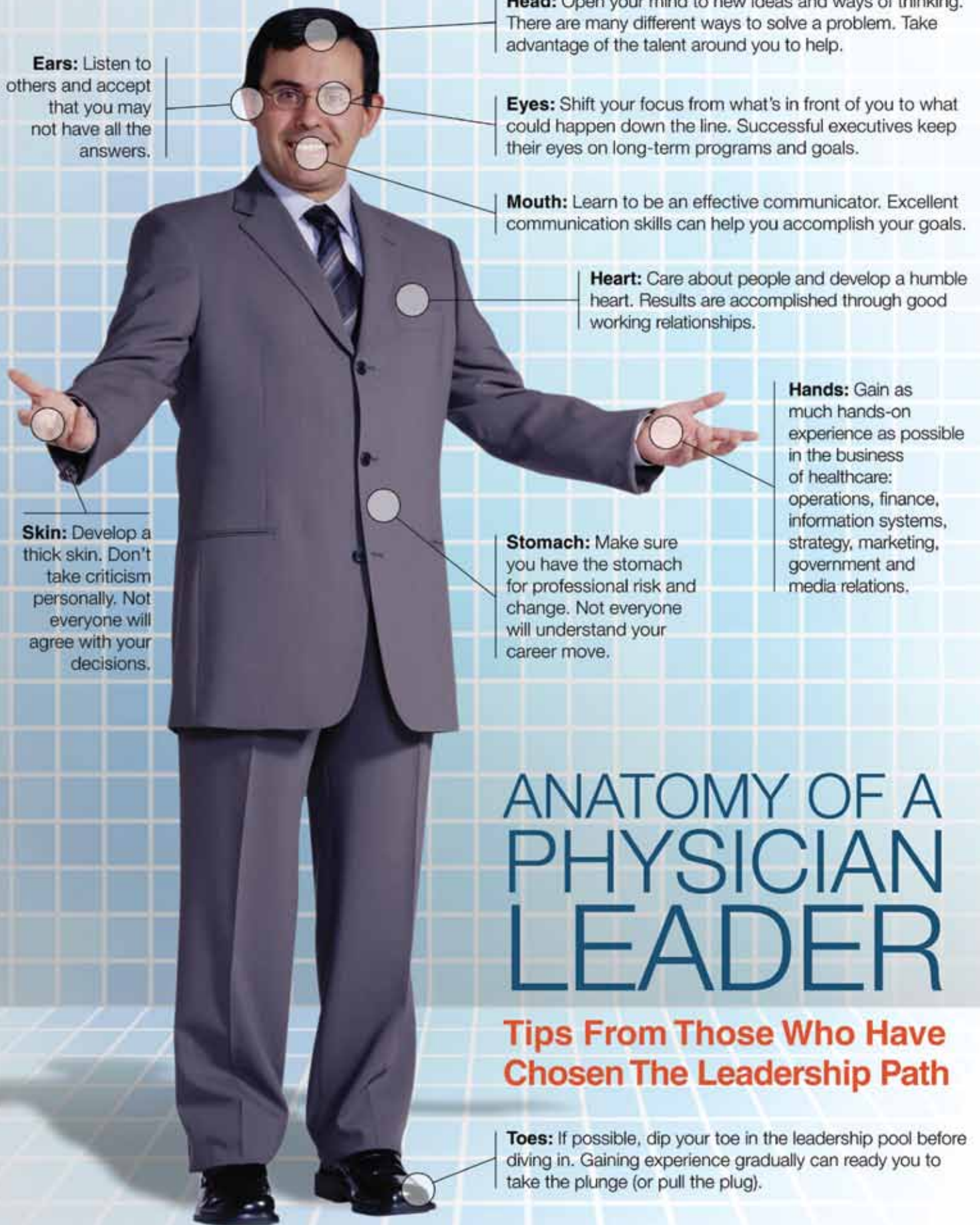
“An effective physician executive keeps patients at the center of everything he or she does. A physician leader never stops being an advocate for the patient, but gains the opportunity to expand his or her framework to become an advocate for all patients served by the organization,” she says.

Regardless if your heart is in the right place, not everyone is going to love you. Criticism can be part of the job. Bryan Becker, MD, MMM, senior associate dean for clinical affairs at University of Illinois – Chicago, shares his observations on how to rise above this pressure.

“As a leader, it’s important to connect with your workforce. Clearly articulate values and common objectives, showing them where the organization is going, but not telling them how to get there,” he advises. “Not everyone will come along with you, and that’s ok. But to elevate an organization, you must work with the people in it so your performance and delivery are better today than yesterday.”

## Open your ears

Listening well is a key skill of a practicing physician—from being attentive to patients to lending an ear to staff concerns. However, leaders on our physician executive panel believe it’s important to open your ears in a new



**Ears:** Listen to others and accept that you may not have all the answers.

**Head:** Open your mind to new ideas and ways of thinking. There are many different ways to solve a problem. Take advantage of the talent around you to help.

**Eyes:** Shift your focus from what's in front of you to what could happen down the line. Successful executives keep their eyes on long-term programs and goals.

**Mouth:** Learn to be an effective communicator. Excellent communication skills can help you accomplish your goals.

**Heart:** Care about people and develop a humble heart. Results are accomplished through good working relationships.

**Hands:** Gain as much hands-on experience as possible in the business of healthcare: operations, finance, information systems, strategy, marketing, government and media relations.

**Stomach:** Make sure you have the stomach for professional risk and change. Not everyone will understand your career move.

**Skin:** Develop a thick skin. Don't take criticism personally. Not everyone will agree with your decisions.

# ANATOMY OF A PHYSICIAN LEADER

## Tips From Those Who Have Chosen The Leadership Path

**Toes:** If possible, dip your toe in the leadership pool before diving in. Gaining experience gradually can ready you to take the plunge (or pull the plug).

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way and listen with a slightly different perspective when undertaking an executive role.

"As physicians, we are used to knowing the answers, to fixing things. As an executive, I've learned that there are often multiple solutions to a problem," explains Paul Silka, MD, chief medical information officer for Cedars-Sinai Health System. "Health care is full of smart, talented and dedicated individuals. As leaders we must trust and listen to them."

Listening to others and valuing their input also helps build relationships and mutual respect. Relationships are vital to successfully effecting change in an organization.

"We may be used to being the captain, but health care requires a team," notes John Cruickshank, DO, MBA, CPE, chief medical officer for Lovelace Health Plan. "To effectively influence change, you must care for and work well with others, consider other perspectives and earn the respect of the people you lead."

## Get your hands dirty

Physicians face new and exciting challenges when transitioning to a leadership role. The challenges may require executives to get their hands dirty in areas of business that may be new to them, such as information technology, media relations or strategy.

"Physicians are not trained to manage a profit and loss statement, business operations, or marketing. But these business disciplines are all important parts of a physician executive's life that you must understand and appreciate," Cruickshank says. "That working knowledge is a primary reason for getting a post-graduate business or management degree."

Many physician executives do gain the business knowledge they need through advanced education. Mentors also are instrumental to making the transition easier. John MacKeigan, MD, executive vice president and chief medical officer for Spectrum Health

System, gained insight into the business of health care by seeking out growth opportunities.

"My advice to physicians who want to be health care executives is this: gain experience in a wide variety of subjects that impact health care delivery and finance; read widely; and get out into the community," MacKeigan says.

## Change your mindset

It isn't always enough for physician executives to have a thorough understanding about finance or operations. Some physician leaders we spoke with emphasized that aspiring executives also must shift how they think about and approach solutions related to these areas.

"Physicians are often trained to be short-term, acute-care focused. As an executive, I've learned to think about issues in the longer term," says Glen Couchman, MD, system chief medical officer for Scott & White Healthcare. "With a longer-term focus, I don't receive the same kind of instant gratification, but the job is more gratifying in terms of being able to make a greater impact."

Sean Muldoon, MD, MPH, senior vice president and chief medical officer for Kindred Healthcare, hospital division, also believes gaining a broad perspective and understanding about an organization is important for an effective leader. "All physician executives should try to first get a feel for the overall priorities of a company," he advises. "Then learn how the company achieves its goals."

## Develop a strong stomach

Physicians treat patients based on clinically tested, evidence-based medicine. As a result, embracing the unproven and unknown can be unsettling. That's why physicians who move into an executive role should have not only passion and desire for the work, but also the stomach for some insecurity and risk.

“Although an executive role can be tremendously rewarding, it can also make you feel somewhat vulnerable. It can be much more time-consuming and may not be as lucrative as a practicing physician role,” Couchman says. “In addition, unlike most practicing physicians, executives may be out of a job quickly. When I was a practicing physician, I felt I could go on treating patients forever.”

Muldoon agrees. “Data suggests that the job span of a physician executive at one organization is very short,” he says. “Longevity is attributable to the ability to reinvent oneself every three years—such as learning a new skill set or taking on a new challenge or role.”

Many of the executives interviewed transitioned from a clinician to executive leader gradually. They

took smaller steps—serving on hospital committees or becoming leaders in their medical associations—before transitioning partially or fully from their clinical practice. This allowed them to test the waters and determine if they had the guts and passion for a career as a health care executive.

### Look at the big picture

The professional life of a physician leader requires commitment, balance and motivation. But for a growing number of physicians, it is extremely rewarding. For the industry, it is critical.

“The industry is changing. Many major health care organizations will only seek physicians as their senior leaders. With a medical and leadership background, these individuals are ideally suited to navigate the complex

healthcare environment,” Freeman says. “Clinical people are now at the helm. That’s where they belong.”

“We are at a time in history where we can truly make a difference,” Becker says. “This is a time where we can see what we are capable of. Don’t be afraid of change in health care; embrace it.”

**Note:** For additional resources and insights from physicians who have chosen a leadership career path, visit [www.cejkaexecutivesearch.com/leaderspanel](http://www.cejkaexecutivesearch.com/leaderspanel) and [www.cejkaexecutivesearch.com/roundtable](http://www.cejkaexecutivesearch.com/roundtable).



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