

Top 10 Skills of High-Performing Healthcare Leaders

By Mark Madden

As healthcare reform continues to drive a rapid pace of change and uncertainty throughout the industry, healthcare leaders are evolving and adapting new skill sets to successfully lead their organizations. Today's executives face a dizzying array of challenges, from meeting reform mandates to filling positions despite the looming shortages of experienced healthcare professionals. To navigate these complexities, effective senior healthcare leaders must possess a wide variety of leadership skills.



Never before have healthcare leaders faced so many challenges. Healthcare reform aside, they continue to battle a variety of complex issues that demand specific skills, personality traits and leadership qualities. Here are ten of the most important leadership skills you need to keep your organization at the forefront of success.

1. Have a Vision... and Stick to It

Effective leaders have a clear vision of what success will look like in a specific time period. They know how to plan for it, how to communicate and direct it, and how to implement it. They dream big and look forward to overcoming the challenges their vision will face. They also know that their vision has to be actionable and measurable. And, perhaps most importantly, they understand that they are ultimately accountable for it. As the public face of the organization, they must own the vision and nurture its continuing success.

2. View Change as Opportunity

In times of uncertainly, good healthcare leaders display an innate agility in adapting to constantly changing conditions. They are flexible enough to recognize and maximize the opportunities that are inherent in times of change, without losing sight of their vision. This will be increasingly important as healthcare reform continues to reshape traditional models of

care. The best leaders understand that change doesn't have to compromise their vision. In fact, it can be an opportunity to propel their vision forward.

3. Be Courageous in the Face of Risk

Creating opportunity out of change usually necessitates taking some risks. However, as famed U.S. General George S. Patton once said, "Take calculated risks. That is much different from being rash." Good leaders understand this. They have the courage to try new things, many of which won't be easy. But they also understand that capitalizing on risks requires careful study and a disciplined plan of action. Not only does this improve their chances of success, it breeds confidence within the organizational ranks that their leader knows how to generate opportunities without carelessly jeopardizing the vision.

4. Know How to Influence People

Today's successful healthcare leaders know how to push past resistance. They realize the influence they can wield and they know how to use it to advance their vision. Good leaders aren't passive. Instead, they are active, persistent advocates for both their vision and their organization. This isn't limited to C-suite leaders, either. Leaders at every level must understand how their influence can be critical in sustaining collective intensity, passion and determination in achieving the organization's goals.

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5. Stay Engaged

Healthcare is a relationship industry, and good healthcare leaders are constantly engaged at every level of their organization. They know how to connect and work with key internal stakeholders – employees and physicians – and external consumers, including patients, families and the community they serve. More importantly, they understand how to integrate these relationships and unite them under a single vision. This will be increasingly critical as healthcare reform continues to redefine traditional reimbursement structures, physician and hospital alignment and the advancement of more patient-centered models of care.

6. Know Talent When You See It

The best leaders are always surrounded by a high-performing team. They trust their staff to effectively take action and achieve the desired outcomes. An effective leader must know how to recruit talent who will act on the organization's vision. This includes everyone, not just the C-suite. Every person must understand the vision, have faith in your ability to execute that vision and possess the skills and attitudes to help achieve it. It's an ongoing process that takes time and diligence.

7. Stay Positive... and Energetic

It always seems that the top performers in any industry have a relentlessly positive attitude towards the future and an inexhaustible reservoir of energy in sharing their vision. Think of the leaders you've admired most. Their drive, determination, optimism and passion are contagious. Where does it come from? Inevitably, it springs from a firm belief in what they are doing and a passion for moving it forward. Not that they didn't experience periods of frustration or complications. But good leaders know how to cultivate a positive, energetic atmosphere, and they understand that it starts with them – every single day.

8. Understand that Healthcare is a Business

Inspiring leaders realize that healthcare is – and should be – a calling. But they also understand that it's a business, too, and like any other successful business,

it is consumer driven. In fact, healthcare reform has actually intensified the consumer focus. Good leaders understand this and they know how to leverage consumer-centric experiences that haven't been traditionally associated with the healthcare industry.

9. Appreciate the Importance of Mentoring

As successful as the healthcare industry as been in developing cutting-edge, life-saving technologies, it has been woefully lacking in creating quality mentoring programs. Good leaders understand the importance of mentoring. They create environments in which current and future leaders can gain valuable experiences early in their careers. This is invaluable to future leaders, because they get to see firsthand how top performers react and respond to different situations. This exposure is critical in developing the competencies they'll need as their careers advance.

10. Continuously Learn and Improve

Today's high performers recognize that leadership skills aren't exclusively intuitive. Rather, they are constantly honed. That's why top leaders make it a habit to seek out leadership development opportunities. For some, this might include reading books or attending seminars. For others, it might include visiting with other leaders whom they admire. Just be sure you can define the methods by which you best learn, thus you'll be more apt to stay engaged in ongoing development. Also, don't be hesitant to look for development opportunities outside healthcare. Other industries face similar challenges and you can learn valuable lessons from networking with leaders in those particular fields.

There's no denying that healthcare will continue to change. As it does, the industry will continue to reward the healthcare leaders who can adapt to those changes and leverage their leadership skills in creating opportunity in a time of uncertainty. The good news is that all of these leadership traits can be learned and honed. Better yet, they can be shared and passed down to the next generation of healthcare leaders.

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