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Effective Ways to Broaden Your Career

The ability to expand your career depends on four primary factors.

Have you caught yourself wondering about your career progress and legacy? “I wish I could have a greater impact on healthcare.” “I could use some tips on getting my next job.” “I have interviewed for other jobs but seem to always come in second place. What’s wrong?” “I really want to make a difference in the work I do.” “I think I could improve things more if I had a higher-level job or more authority. How do I get it?”

One way to address these and similar questions is to strategically broaden your career. Getting more advanced jobs usually leads to more personal satisfaction and feelings of success. But success is not all about getting successively higher-level jobs or even more pay. Many leaders wish to broaden their careers to give back to the field, serve others or help their communities. As is often the case with clinicians, nonclinical leaders may enter a career in healthcare to follow that “higher calling.”

Regardless of your ultimate career aim, it is true that more authority provides added opportunity to encounter wide-ranging issues and to make a greater impact. A broadened career also is correlated with higher levels of authority as well as higher risk. Four primary factors

influence the extent to which a healthcare executive can broaden his or her career: experiences, interpersonal skills, ability to be noticed and leadership presence.

Experiences

Gaining exposure to new experiences and expanding the scope and understanding of additional aspects of healthcare management are some of the best ways to grow a career. One CEO stated, “The more you know, the more you can do, and the more you can do, the more you will learn.”

For example, nonclinical leaders benefit from meaningful clinical exposure. A lack of deep-seated knowledge of what happens in patient care settings is a recipe for making poor decisions. Another CEO remarked, “I have always found that vice presidents who have either worked in clinical areas or spent significant time gaining exposure to clinical areas make far better operational decisions. When I recruit, those individuals get higher consideration.”

Does this mean that finance or marketing executives cannot be as effective if they have not had clinical experience or exposure? No, simply that the lack of exposure can be career-limiting. And it can curb a

leader’s ability to be thorough in decision making. A CFO remarked, “Early in my career, I frequently spent entire shifts in the emergency room or other clinical areas. Initially, I did this out of pure curiosity, but I quickly found it sharpened my credibility with clinical leaders and gave me confidence in making decisions. I am a far better CFO because of this. And it gives me great pleasure to continue to visit clinical patient care areas.”

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Career growth can come from both broader and deeper experiences. Working in jobs in diverse areas of the organization broadens perspective and helps leaders learn how to “connect the dots.” This broad exposure creates system thinkers, and aids in understanding quality and service issues. Similarly, deep experience in one area leads one to become known as an expert. Experts are often sought after and viewed as valuable resources to their organizations.

In addition, career growth may be enhanced by experience with both tactical operations management

and strategic leadership matters. Individuals who can address a variety of day-to-day problems and also shift focus to help craft longer-term strategic vision are the most adept leaders. One CEO said, “Some leaders prefer day-to-day management, while some prefer dealing with longer-term issues. But exposure and time spent in both areas makes for more well-rounded executives.”

Interpersonal Skills

The ability to influence others is often the first trait acquired when broadening a career. It begins with learning to understand others, articulating clear expectations and providing meaningful feedback. It also requires correcting and coaching others. Early careerists often find themselves in staff positions with no direct reports. They would be wise to seek out jobs that provide supervisory responsibilities as soon as possible.

The transition from a role with individual responsibility to managing the work of others can be challenging. Learning to reallocate time is difficult, and failure to do so results in constantly putting out fires. Appropriate delegation—which is both an art and a skill—can alleviate time constraints and represents a career-broadening ability.

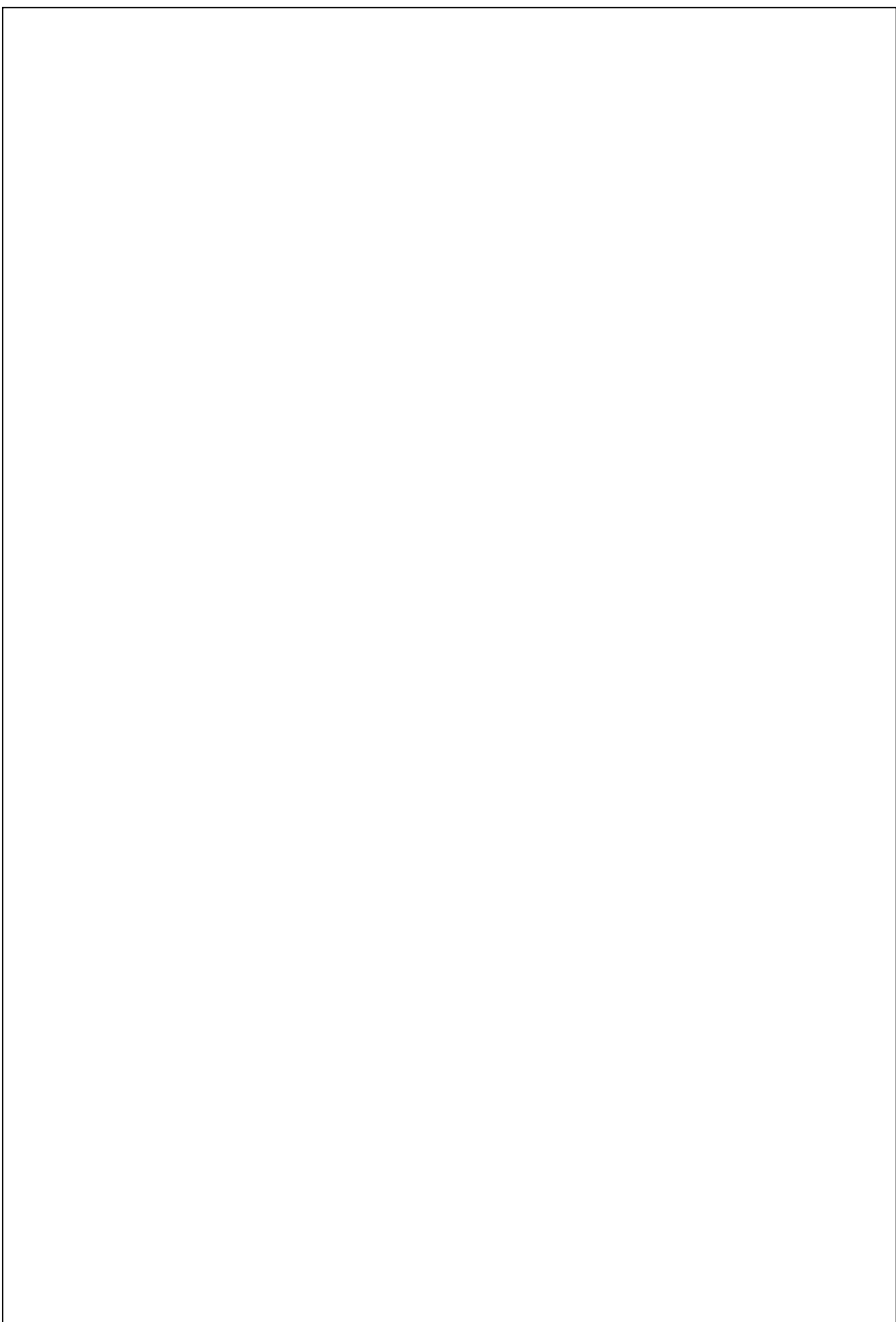
Interpersonal skills are key to becoming an authentic leader and building credibility, another necessary component of a broadening career. Authentic leadership is characterized by sharing successes, taking blame when appropriate, clarifying direction and performance expectations, ensuring team leadership skills are strong, and avoiding the temptation

to overpromise (e.g., raises or promotions, upgrades, policy changes)—which is a quick way to lose all credibility.

Being Noticed

Having your accomplishments noticed by others need not be

viewed as arrogance. It is a prime opportunity to learn from others seeking to find out how you have succeeded. Sharing successes while attending educational programs, for example, offers additional opportunities to learn from others. Highly effective leaders tend to appreciate



being measured and enjoy the opportunity to share their successes.

Another way to be noticed is to simply be prepared. Do your homework, become known as the person who has a thorough understanding of the subject at hand and have your facts in order. Walk into meetings with a reputation—that of someone who is prepped and unshakable.

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Leadership Presence

Broadening a career also means attending to intangible traits, in particular, presence. While its definition can be elusive, it generally means possessing poise, confidence, dignity and composure in difficult situations. A CEO once described it as a “behavioral sense of the appropriate.”

Presence also involves knowing what to let go of and what to pick up. As leaders grow in stature and influence, they learn to take an “outside-in view” of their organizations rather than an “inside-out view”; similarly, they can maintain both peripheral vision and a frontal view.

Presenting an air of confidence without seeming arrogant is an art,

but it is one that can be studied. Watch how highly effective leaders present themselves in a variety of situations, then adapt their behaviors to your own personality because that is what will surface under stress.

Additional Tips

Be close to the business. Learn the activities that take place throughout your organization. Be curious and spend time in a variety of work areas. Spend the occasional shift in clinical areas to stay in touch with the core reason the organization exists. Clinician leaders are encouraged to spend time in operational areas that may confound them, such as finance or business.

Adopt a broad mindset. Think like a healthcare executive first and a (fill in the blank—nursing, legal, physician, finance, human resources, marketing) executive second.

Become an expert in some area. Become known as the authority in one aspect of the business.

Be both a manager and a leader. Know how to manage day-to-day issues and problems but also be able to shift your thinking to long-term strategy.

Step outside your organization. Serve on boards of local companies, volunteer with the United Way or another charitable organization, or join a chamber of commerce committee. Participate in your ACHE chapter and your state or local hospital association.

Volunteer for tough projects. No greater experience can be had than those where the stakes are high and the return for the organization is significant.

Learn the continuum of care. If you have never been on a home care visit, try to shadow home care staff. Make an effort to delve more deeply into the physician office setting.

Manage your own work. Gain the skill of managing your workload to be prepared for unexpected problems or issues.

Reflect. Regularly step back from daily activities to define or redefine priorities. Be goal oriented, reviewing achievements on occasion. Keep a balanced perspective.

Keep your head up. Finally, keep your eyes looking in all directions. Look for opportunities to serve, grow and develop.

These tips can greatly help you as you work to improve the healthcare field, support better quality and safety for those to whom we provide care, and gain personal satisfaction from your work and profession. ▲

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Editor’s note: For complimentary resources to help identify skill gaps, go to ache.org/CareerResources and click on “Competency Self-Assessment Tool” on the right.