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Enhancing Physician Engagement

Molding physicians into leaders is tantamount to an organization's success.

The future of healthcare hinges on providing leadership development opportunities for physicians, and the way in which your organization approaches this topic will impact its long-term viability.

“If you can get strong clinical physicians to learn and master leadership skills, the combination of these two competencies will make big-time differences in your quality, costs and outcomes,” says John Byrnes, MD, CEO, Byrnes Healthcare Group and an ACHE Member. “Physicians know firsthand what quality looks like, and if you help them become leaders, then we will see true transformation in healthcare.”

Although physicians have the clinical skills essential to an organization's success, many times they would benefit from next-level leadership development to help their team and their organization navigate change. Thus, for physicians to become effective executives, they require exposure to strategic leadership concepts and the opportunity to learn through experience. Moreover, they must gain an understanding of the fundamentals of leadership and organizational behavior and both acquire and practice specific leadership competencies.

Physician leadership development programs are an excellent way to strengthen

leadership, and they have taken off exponentially in hospitals and health systems during the past few years. As Kathleen L. Forbes, MD, chief integration officer, Premier Health, and an ACHE Member, notes, “Physician engagement grows in direct correlation with physician leadership development.”

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Unlike traditional master's degree health administration programs that have prescribed curriculum content, the strategies, subject matter content and methodologies used for physician leadership development programs vary greatly. Some healthcare organizations simply provide support for their physicians to obtain master's degrees. Others partner with local universities to bring a specialized curriculum to the sponsoring healthcare organization. Many organizations encourage their physicians to attend diverse programs that organizations such as ACHE, the American Association for Physician Leadership and the Medical Group

Management Association offer. Others bring in expert speakers to their organizations for a program of the month. Although all of these approaches do provide some benefit, there is seemingly no protocol to follow.

Moreover, poorly planned, sporadic approaches may actually produce negative results. Arbitrary programs lack synchronization and deliver unreliable outcomes. Outside programs also may introduce concepts inconsistent with an organization's strategy.

Faced with a significantly high demand for and a critical short supply of physician leaders, organizations would be wise to grow their own programs and not seek external recruitment to solve their needs.

Elements of a Highly Effective Physician Leadership Development Program

Several key elements are reflected in successful development programs. Below are 11 to consider when crafting one tailored to your organization's strategic plan.

A well-articulated vision and philosophy. An effective program begins with a thorough exploration of what is needed and the desired outcomes. The reason for the program cannot be a veiled attempt at getting physicians in line. A deep-seated belief that increased physician leadership will enhance quality and aid in clinical transformation is crucial for a successful program.

A formalized selection process. There should be formal entrance requirements, some type of screening and recognition of the importance of

program selection. The best programs are competitive and sought after by highly engaged physicians who are passionate about organizationwide change and improvement.

The use of real-world examples.

Physicians train clinically with real patients and tangible challenges; they do not respond well to leadership theory and what they might perceive as irrelevant management discussions and meetings. The best physician leadership programs provide real-world case examples and specifics based on actual problems and issues; the content must be practical and tactical.

Adult learning opportunities. One of the areas where most physician leadership development programs flounder is

failing to recognize the principles of adult learning. An essential component is teachers who actively involve physicians in the learning process and who guide them toward discovery versus simply feeding them facts. These presenters link new material with physicians' existing knowledge and experience, generating a robust and relevant learning experience.

A self-awareness assessment. It is vital that physicians who seek leadership roles understand the need for self-awareness and the ability to understand leadership competencies. The skill of seeing ourselves as others see us is a great leadership strength; yet most physicians have had few sources of feedback since their residency training. The assessments used should be

sophisticated, valid and supplemented by the use of 360-degree evaluations and leadership coaches.

Discussion of management- and leadership-oriented matters. In the purest sense, leadership and management are different. Leadership is focused more on the longer term and strategic course of an organization and involves anticipating and navigating change, while management brings stability, consistency and order to an organization. Both are important for highly functioning organizations, and the coursework provided in the leadership programs must help physicians understand this.

High-level offerings. After completing a program, physicians should seek out other education offerings to further improve their knowledge and understanding of healthcare leadership. Continuous learning in all facets of life is necessary to sustain success and navigate change. These higher forms of education can include involvement in the organization's strategy and management processes, formal coaching programs with professional executive coaches or other practices.

A concentration on observable behavioral leadership competencies. As scientists, physicians prefer to learn leadership from the perspective of observable behavior. It is not sufficient to simply describe effective leadership as comprising such elements as strong communications, team play, vision or other general terms. Physicians prefer to gain insight into the behaviors associated with leadership. This is why discussions around leadership competencies are so effective in development programs.

Demonstrated understanding of physician sacrifices. Physicians juggle demanding professional responsibilities and family concerns while often facing life-or-death situations with their patients. Even if they are highly motivated to become more effective leaders, their schedules and life pressures may limit the time they can invest in leadership development. As a result, learning opportunities must be made available at times that are convenient for them and delivered in manageable portions. Alternative ways to gain higher levels of knowledge should be incorporated into any physician leadership program. Webinars are growing in popularity and are an effective way for physicians to gather information on their own time. Podcasts are another popular option, as they allow physicians to listen while commuting or even while exercising.

Discussions around career progression. Many programs instruct physicians on leadership competencies but then don't allow physicians to demonstrate what they learned. Those who have graduated from leadership development programs should be given opportunities to become more involved in the operations of the enterprise such as through part-time endeavors. Some organizations provide advanced leadership courses, while others create councils that give physicians a forum for continuing discussion, interaction and learning.

Opportunities for mentorship. Leadership development is a life-long pursuit. Just as clinical skills can be refined, leadership skills can always be improved. One of the

best support systems for growth is a mentor who is at least slightly more seasoned and has experienced a variety of leadership challenges and resolutions. Sometimes this involves the use of a formalized leadership coach, other times an involved boss or a peer physician leader from another organization. Ultimately, the better programs provide for mentoring and ensure new physician leaders have the support they need with which to grow.

“Our experiences have clearly shown that physicians who learn to be leaders simply get it,” says Lee Hammerling, MD, chief physician executive at ProMedica. “They know how all the component parts fit together. That facilitates improved physician engagement, where physician leaders are active on the front lines and are modeling behaviors that lead us toward improved quality.”

Investment in physician leadership development will support an organization's clinical integration journey by positioning physicians to become actively engaged partners with the organization. Ensure your organization develops its physician leadership program appropriately and effectively to sustain growth and success. ▲

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