Leadership

Keys to Success for Department Chairs and Section Heads

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In this article...

Take a look at the characteristics needed for a physician leader to thrive as a department chair or section head.

Effective leadership in medicine is growing increasingly important. Health care reform will bring tremendous change and a priority will be placed on leading change.

For organizations to embrace change there has to be strong leadership from the individual groups that make up the organization. The traditional “top-down approach” has been replaced by group consensus and “leadership from the masses” as we transition to a new era of medical leadership.

This is not to say that strong leadership from the chief executive officer and board of directors is not necessary. It is imperative. But they must focus on vision, mission and high-level strategy and goals. The day-to-day operational leadership should be left to the department chairs and section heads.

To be successful, the upper tier of leadership must empower their department chairs and section heads to carry out this important task. Without their unyielding support, the mid-level leadership will be impotent in their role to lead others. So what constitutes a good leader? How do they act? What makes them different from the rest? The answers aren’t easy.

We all know excellent leaders when we see them and interact with them, but in many cases they are difficult to describe. Perhaps some qualities come to mind:

- Optimistic
- Approachable
- Honest
- Dependable
- With strong communication skills

It is these traits that separate the leaders from the followers and it is these traits that help guide organizations in times of change. They are crucial to an organization’s success.

To help define what makes a successful leader here are tips and pointers that should help section chiefs and department chairs perform better in their roles.

Am I qualified?

When faced with the selection of a new department chair or section head, the most frequent question asked by potential candidates is: Am I really qualified to lead my group?

Perhaps the best answer to this is: Do you feel you can put other’s needs before your own and help the department develop and reach its goals?

Many may back away from the opportunity to lead groups while others are drawn to it. The role often requires additional time away from family and can be distracting from your usual workload, particularly if there are issues that require significant attention.

The opportunity may be very rewarding as you assist others in reaching their own goals. It can allow you to develop new talents as you pursue a somewhat different path in medicine.

Unfortunately, many are ill-equipped to step into a leadership role. They may struggle as they attempt to lead others, but over time most can develop rudimentary skills that improve their effectiveness.
Personal attributes

Important personal attributes that play an important role in the success of a leader are numerous. They are not always inherited and can be developed as inexperienced physicians assume more responsibility and practice in the process of leading others. It goes without saying that effective leadership is not developed overnight and nothing can substitute for experience.

If you haven’t had the opportunity to lead, the process will be an ongoing learning experience as you come to learn how to handle multiple situations.

Much like parenting there is no accepted rule book. In most cases you must rely on your past experiences and good judgment to make the best decision. Without a doubt there are some traits that are valued in leadership. Some are easier to develop than others. Some may argue these are personality traits that are inherited but many (if not most) can be acquired.

Dedication

Leaders must be dedicated to the job they do. They must be invested in the organization and believe in the direction, vision and goals of the organization.

It does not take long for those around you to quickly surmise if you are dedicated to the organization you serve and the job you do. Many leaders are the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave. They are always looking to help and assume additional responsibility. They rarely say no and seem to adapt to increased demands despite little rewards. It seems the more they are given the more they are able to accomplish without limits.

Additionally they have the organization’s best interest in mind. They must put the patients first, the organization second, the department third and finally the individual physicians fourth as they prioritize their decision making.

Making decisions in their own self-interest will destroy the trust of others. Many will struggle with this new prioritization as we put the patient's needs first with health care reform.

Confidence

Effective leaders must reflect a sense of confidence in their manner. They must carefully weigh important data, and with appropriate input, make educated decisions that place the organization's best interests in mind.

They must commit to their decision and sometimes take criticism for a decision that does not resonate well with colleagues. Although they should constantly review feedback, they should not waiver in their decision if, after further review, it continues to be the best decision for the issue at hand.

Effective leadership at times will bring isolation. It has been said that excellent leaders are like eagles—they are not found in flocks. They may be alone in their difficult decisions when others doubt their plans for the group.

They should feel comfortable speaking to their group or to others about their group. This is often a task met with much apprehension. Public speaking is a skill that is honed with repeated practice. The leader should
Table 1

Head of Section Responsibilities

Background Statements:

- The needs of our patients come first.
- Physicians and employee/staff of the clinic must be fully committed to the institution for which they serve.
- A strong clinic commitment to excellent patient care is the foundation for success.
- Self-serving behavior at the expense of the clinic should not be acceptable.

Overview:

- Important role for the clinic.
  - Leaders for the clinic
  - Ambassadors
  - Mentors
- Appointed by BOD with input from section members.
- Term is usually 3-5 years/rotation among members.
- Responsibility to lead the section and report to the BOD.
- Stipend is given with expectations.

Specific Responsibilities:

- Conduct regular section meetings.
- Distribute important information to colleagues.
- Disseminate, discuss and report back to the board about important key issues that may affect physicians and their clinical care when requested by the board of directors.
- Develop short- and long-term plans for the section (1-, 3- and 5-year plans).
  - Review recruiting needs.
  - Review capital requests.
  - Present written plan to board of directors yearly.
- Meet with individual section members at least once yearly.
- Fill out career development assessment once yearly and forward to medical director.
- Support/enforce clinic policies and decisions.

always be prepared, and practicing the delivery of a speech or message will help improve performance.

Honesty and trust

Honesty is a trait that is not necessarily acquired. You don’t develop honesty—either you are an honest person or a dishonest person.

You can, however, develop and build trust through your actions. A common example: if faced with difficult decisions or discussions it is imperative not to stretch the truth or avoid issues that play into your decision. Although at times difficult to do, you should always tell the truth when confronted with difficult questions.

Be careful not to treat people differently. You should not play “favorites,” and avoid any perception that you do. It is also important to be consistent in your approach to decision making. This will build trust in your leadership ability with those who work with you.

Dependability

Dependability is crucial for a leader. If you tell someone you will do something it is paramount you do it. Consistent follow-up after discussions will help evoke trust. Make lists to help remind you of tasks. Often, it’s the little things you remember that have a big impression on those you lead.

Never underestimate the seemingly small details of a conversation with your colleagues. They may be completely off your radar but to those who made the comment or request they become a big deal when they go unrecognized or unanswered. If a task or decision requires a significant amount of time provide regular updates. Your colleagues will appreciate your willingness to keep them informed.

Respect

For leaders to be effective they must be respected by their colleagues. This usually begins with
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- Support/enforce physician standards and expectations.
- Make sure call schedule is completed in a timely manner when applicable.
- Counsel fellow partners regarding clinic issues.
- Coordinate physician staff needs and provide oversight for recruiting.
- Oversee productivity and the section's financial performance/meet monthly with your department manager/yearly with CFO to review.
- Provide important feedback to partners when needed in the best interest of our patients and the clinic.
- Address and resolve reasons why partners are not utilizing clinic ancillary services and the ambulatory surgical center.
- Present a comprehensive plan and needs assessment for any new hire.
- Identify superb candidates and recruit effectively when necessary.
- Review quality measures and coordinate peer review on a regular basis.
  - Yearly quality project for the section
  - Chart audits once yearly on each member of the section to ensure quality

respect as a clinician. Unfortunately though, you can be the best clinician but an ineffective leader. It will take leadership training and experience to get you the additional tools, but the respect of colleagues is a prerequisite of effective leadership. Furthermore, once you accept a leadership role, you must continue to maintain the respect of your colleagues.

Those who choose to remain in the clinical environment seeing and treating patients are usually held in higher regard by colleagues than those who completely withdraw from clinical care to become an administrator.

Keeping up to date with clinical issues and especially maintenance of certification and board certification are important tasks that should not be neglected. As the old adage goes, “you must use it or lose it.”

many health care institutions and the physicians who struggle in an electronic environment. The successful leader will herd their groups through myriad challenges facing physicians in the reform movement.

They must remain optimistic, “seeing the glass half full” when others are seeing it “half empty” in the day-to-day operations of their organization. They must also refrain from the water cooler discussions criticizing administration for the changes and instead lead by their example.

**Strong communication skills**

Good communication skills are a must for a successful physician leader. They must be able to give good and not-so-good feedback when necessary. They know that providing positive feedback is as important as providing negative feedback, and they make every effort to find the good in people’s work.

They must be able to effectively communicate with their fellow physicians and staff about organizational issues and be able to explain the reasoning behind institutional goals, decisions and mandates.

In many ways they are the voice of administration and the board of directors while serving as the department chair or section head. The good communicator knows when to listen and when to speak. They know in most cases it is more important to be a good listener than a talented speaker.

**Optimism**

Leaders must instill hope and confidence. Hope and confidence that their organization will provide exceptional health care and hope that, provided they are doing good work, the physicians and employees have a safe job with fair compensation.

Leaders must look for the good when things go bad. They must lead their group through adversity. When faced with change they must embrace it and lead others through the change process.

Perhaps now, more than any other time, physician leaders will play a key role in shaping the future for their health care organizations. A prime example is the adoption of an electronic health record and attainment of the meaningful use criteria. This will be a defining moment for

**Approachable**

Good leaders are easily approachable. They are not intimidating. Their doors are always open. They are sounding boards for physicians with sensitive issues on their minds. They stop everything and focus on the individual when approached by a colleague or employee.

Department chairs and heads of section are reassuring when doctors need encouragement and they are
Public speaking is a skill that is honed with repeated practice.

prepared to offer words of encouragement or constructive criticism to make their colleagues better.

They are confidants to those who need to share sensitive information or feelings about others they work with. They do not participate in gossip or innuendo. In many ways they may serve as therapists for those around them. Without a doubt they play an important role in the psychological well-being of those who work along with them.

Specific tasks

In addition to the personal attributes that will help you be an effective department chair or head of section there are also specific tasks that you should not ignore. As a leader there is an expectation of certain activities that you should coordinate (see Table 1). These will help you achieve your expectations and goals and the expectations and goals of your organization.

Hold regular meetings

The effective department chair or section head holds regularly scheduled meetings. They are held at a predictable time and date and at a familiar place. They start on time and end on time and are respectful of other people’s personal time.

There is an agenda for each meeting that is circulated beforehand so that fellow department members can adequately prepare for the meeting. Appropriate guests are invited when needed to help clarify issues or present new issues or topics. The chair guides the meeting in a constructive manner that encourages discussion and feedback of others.

The chair may choose to table controversial topics if more information is necessary. The chair may also call a vote on important issues that require a decision. Finally the chair ensures minutes are taken and then distributed after the meeting for anyone who could not attend and to use as a reference if further questions surface regarding the issues discussed.

Be a conduit for information

The department chair or section head should be the primary communicator for the organization to their colleagues. In typical organizations meetings are held with department chairs or section heads usually at least monthly to distribute important information.

Following these meetings it is imperative for these leaders to accurately and reliably report back to their colleagues about important issues. This task will ensure that all individuals are properly informed of the organization’s business and clinical affairs.

Delegate tasks

In order to get appropriate buy-in from your department or section members it is imperative you involve them in the activities of the department. An effective leader is one who puts the right opportunity with the right department member.

Delegating will allow more group behavior and will provide more insight into problem solving. Once individuals are involved in the process they will be much more likely to endorse or adopt a project or decision. This opportunity also allows individuals to develop their own talent in situations where they need to lead others.

Seek advice

The success of a leader is often predicated on how he or she deals with controversial issues. In many situations the leader is dependent on others to provide input, especially on important decisions.

The astute leader will seek out both public and private feedback before making an important decision. This process will allow the leader to see how the issue will be perceived by others and how they may respond to a decision prior to making the actual decision.

The vetting process is often critical in the process of making important decisions that affect the section or department. In larger departments it may be helpful to have an executive committee that weighs in on issues for the benefit of the department chair or section head.

In smaller departments or sections the group may be composed of only one or two trusted colleagues who can provide important feedback prior to important decisions. Regardless of the size some due diligence on the part of the department chair or section head prior to making decisions for the group will help ensure success and buy-in.

Meet privately with team

One of the most important roles you have as a leader is assisting and promoting your colleagues. An excellent leader helps their colleagues set and achieve goals. In many cases they may help them decide on how to become active in the organization or what societies and professional organizations they should be encouraged to join. The committed leader should make time to meet privately with each member of their section or department at least yearly.

They should discuss the department members goals and how the chair can assist them with accomplishment of these goals. This can be
facilitated with a career development assessment. They should review the prior year and assess whether personal goals were met and if not why.

The chair should take time to provide both positive comments and address any concerns they may have with the department member. Topics such as clinical quality, patient satisfaction, productivity, continuing education, maintenance of certification and board certification should be discussed.

The chair should document these encounters and provide appropriate follow up when needed. A summary of the meeting can be provided to the department member to improve a mutual approach to shared goals. This documentation can then be used the following year to discuss the accomplishment of personal goals.

**Address issues of concern**

When problems are not addressed in a timely manner they tend to escalate. People become frustrated and tempers grow short. A department can be adversely affected if issues are not confronted in a timely fashion.

The savvy department chair will acknowledge an issue of concern immediately but will choose to review the situation before making a judgment to make sure they have all the facts and are making the right decision for the group.

If the issue is emotionally charged waiting a day or so may help diffuse a potentially volatile situation. A rush to judgment will likely result in a poor decision and a mark against the leader. In most situations, a response within a couple of days is satisfactory provided the department chair has acknowledged the issue.

**Communicate expectations**

Every leader should have a set of goals for your group. These goals are best developed with the assistance and input of your group, and the group should review and update these goals at least yearly. Additionally these goals should be communicated to everyone in your department. This includes non-physician support staff and other personnel who are part of your office.

**Work with administrative team**

Most departments will have an administrative person or staff assigned to them. It is imperative that leaders work closely with that individual. He or she can be invaluable in developing reports, assisting with business-related financial data (which most physician leaders struggle with), dealing with sensitive human resource issues and the operational issues that occur daily.

The administrative colleague should be treated as a respected team member who brings special skills to assist the group. Physician leaders should resist any attempt to create a wedge in the relationship when dealing with administrative colleagues.

Furthermore it is best for the administrative team to handle human resource issues instead of individual physicians being involved. Although support staff can be evaluated by the physician workforce, the hiring and firing decisions of support staff are best left to administration (i.e., human resource director or practice manager).

**Get leadership training**

Leadership is a skill that is learned and refined with experience. Leadership education is no longer an option but rather a prerequisite for health care executives. Many courses are available and will be beneficial to a department chair or section head.

**Meet with your CEO/CMO**

Each organization has its own hierarchy of leadership. In most organizations the department chair or section head reports to a chief executive officer or chief medical officer.

It is important to meet regularly with senior leadership to discuss challenges that face the department and the leader. It may also provide a chance to get helpful feedback from the people you directly report to.

Although at times most of us are reluctant to seek feedback, this exercise can help identify areas of strength regarding your leadership skills or perhaps areas for potential improvement. Identifying these areas on a regular basis through feedback will help you succeed in your role. Embrace the process as part of self-improvement.

**Conclusions**

Equipped with the tools of effective leadership, the department chair or section head can be successful at leading their group and can play an important role in shaping the future of their organization.

Although never easy, the job can be very satisfying and rewarding. A leader is never finished with the learning process of leadership. Every day brings new challenges but also the opportunity to develop and expand their skills.

The changes on the health care horizon will require strong leadership and the call has never been louder for physicians to lead their colleagues to improve health care to our patients.