

Is Coaching a Prescription for Leadership Success?

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Leaders are born not made! Or is it, leaders are made not born? There are two schools of thought on what it takes to be a leader in today's complex health care environment. What is common to both is that the skills and talents that are required to be a leader are many and diverse. While some leadership skills are innate, many are not.

What does this mean to Physician Executives? Physician Executives have significant and wide ranging leadership responsibilities within the health care environment. Physicians are trained in the curriculum of medicine whether as a general practitioner or as a specialist and are often not schooled in the disciplines of management and leadership. When appointed to a leadership role such as Chief of Staff or Departmental Chief, physicians generally continue to be part of a health care team, delivering medical services, while managing and leading their team of physician colleagues. Where does a physician look for the knowledge required to succeed in a leadership role? Who can they speak to for feedback on their strengths and guidance on areas for growth? How do they grow in those areas? Who can help them develop the blueprint for their leadership vision, style and goals? Often, the answers are not readily available within the health care setting.

An Executive Coach can be the missing piece of the puzzle that empowers the Physician Executive to be the leader that they want to be. Coaching is a dynamic two-way process that helps clients define, articulate and take action towards achieving professional success and often, creates greater balance and a more fulfilling personal life. As an objective third party, a coach will listen, guide and help a physician work their way through the challenges of leading a group of physician colleagues.

As an Executive Coach who works with leaders in the health care field, I commonly see three categories of individuals whose leadership skills grow expedientially when they retain a coach.

The first group are experienced leaders who are dealing with complex leadership challenges and are looking for new ways to have an impact in their health care setting. Issues like managing conflict with physician colleagues, dealing with disruptive behaviour, growing the team or even mentoring new leaders within the team are challenging when you are dealing with members of the medical staff that you continue to work with as a physician colleague. The demands on leaders in our health care settings are becoming increasingly complex in an age of financial restraint, increasing demand for services, rapid technological innovation, increasing costs for the delivery of services and a desire by many physicians for an improved work life balance. Often, a

Physician Executive will not want to discuss or disclose information within their health care setting as it may make them look vulnerable, it may have an impact on other members of the team, or appropriate people are simply not available to have those discussions.

For those leaders, an Executive Coach helps the Physician Executive to focus on who they are as a leader, what their strengths are, connects them with their own creativity and resourcefulness, and restores their leadership compass as they navigate these issues. An Executive Coach also helps to rebuild or for some, create for the first time, the blueprint for what the Physician Executive wants to achieve in their department or the positive changes they want to make within their health care setting.

Secondly, for newly minted Physician Executives, an Executive Coach helps them develop and take action towards creating a clear understanding of their own leadership style, their strengths and the vision of what kind of leader they want to be. Little support and training is given to Physician Executives when they are promoted into leadership roles and learning on the job is often the norm. Coaching is a powerful alliance designed to forward and enhance the lifelong process of human learning, effectiveness and fulfillment.

Finally, talented physicians who are being targeted for physician leadership roles benefit greatly from coaching. Coaching helps to prepare the leader within and gives them the opportunity to develop a clear understanding of their leadership strengths, their growth areas and the key to their effectiveness. When a high performing physician has been coached, they are able to step into leadership roles with greater confidence, knowledge of what is required of them and an eagerness to begin leading. These leaders transition more smoothly into these roles and are effective much earlier.

The economics of hiring an Executive Coach are compelling. An independent study by MetrixGlobal showed that the average return on investment on coaching exceeds 500% with a 98.5% overall client satisfaction rate. In the corporate world, coaching is widely used, with the Hay Group reporting that between 25 and 40% of Fortune 500 companies use executive coaches. In a Manchester Review study, an overwhelming 93% of executives who have received coaching reported that they would recommend coaching to others.

Executive coaching is a strategic choice made by executives and leaders who want to build on their strengths and enhance their leadership effectiveness. Beyond the benefits experienced by the client, coaching results in improved professional relationships, teamwork, job satisfaction and productivity. It is comparable to a general practitioner consulting a specialist to augment the care they are providing to a patient.

In the final analysis, the health care environment is one of the most complex areas to work within given the internal dynamics as well as the challenges in the current external environment. The need for skilled Physician Executives has never been greater.

In the Harvard Business Review article, “The Wild West of Executive Coaching” authors Sherman and Freas comment, “It is remarkable how many smart, highly motivated, and apparently responsible people rarely pause to contemplate their own behaviour. Often more inclined to move on than to reflect deeply, executives may reach the top ranks without addressing their limitations. Coaching gets them to slow down, gain awareness, and notice the effects of their words and actions. That enables coaches to perceive choices rather than simply react to events; ultimately, coaching can empower them to assume responsibility for their impact on the world..... Coaching doesn’t end with self-awareness. It is a form of active learning that transfers essential communication and relationship skills....This approach can help leaders adapt to new responsibilities, reduce destructive behaviours, improve retention with a perceived perk, enhance teamwork, align individuals to collective goals, facilitate succession and support organizational change.”

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