

Healthcare: Leading Through Uncertain Times

By: Kathy Jordan, CEO and Founder, Jordan Search Consultants

Keeping up with the latest healthcare policies has never been more daunting. Although the Trump administration did not succeed in passing the American Health Care Act which would have totally repealed and replaced the ACA this year, it's clear that significant change is still on the horizon.

In fact, on October 29, President Trump tweeted, "As usual, the ObamaCare premiums will be up (the Dems own it), but we will Repeal & Replace and have great Healthcare soon after Tax Cuts!"

As the country awaits the release of the impending tax reform and details about future healthcare changes, organizations are faced with navigating uncertain terrain.



How will models of insurance and reimbursement be affected? How will it be determined which patients are seen, where, and by whom? Will there be internal restructuring within the workplace, and how will this restructuring be managed? Will there be a shift in population health emphases and value-based care compensation models?

Physicians, hospital administrators, and other healthcare industry thought leaders are wondering how to prepare for the unknown—when they have just overhauled systems and processes for Affordable Care Act (ACA) requirements. Healthcare executives are grappling with how to lead in times of uncertainty.

What can we do?

In the face of this enigma, how can leaders within healthcare organizations navigate this fog of uncertainty, manage employee, customer, and stakeholder anxiety, and find the opportunities which lie within the challenges?

Mark Carney, a Canadian economist who currently serves as Governor of the Bank of England, says "To emerge from an uncertain world with confidence, people and businesses need a fixed point by which to navigate." That fixed point in a healthcare organization must be the guiding mission and purpose. Positioning your organization

for success amidst chaos requires maintaining a laser-focused vision for the future and having the confidence and resiliency to sustain and realize that vision. It means being ever mindful of the organization's goals, a patient-first mentality, and continuing to develop the most strategic and propitious paths to deliver the best possible care. It means being adaptive and realistic about what changes are happening and what their impact will be. It means providing real reassurance to your employees that the end game has not changed even though the rules might be different.

How can we do this?

In the face of sweeping, yet ambiguous healthcare reform, leaders must remain steadfast, yet flexible, positioning their organizations to thrive whatever the future might bring. According to an article titled *Navigating the Health System's Transformation: A Leadership Toolkit for Healthcare Executives* by Howard B. Graman, M.D., FACP, and Vice President of AMGA Consulting Services, "As the industry continues to move toward more efficient and effective practices, there are numerous challenges we, as healthcare leaders, must navigate...strong physician and executive leadership is more critical now than ever." Effective leaders must acknowledge change, make informed choices, and never lose sight of their organization's principles, values, and mission.

Below are eight tactics for leading effectively and strategically during uncertain times:



1. Acknowledge Change

There is nothing worse than ignoring the elephant in the room. When it's obvious changes are happening, good leaders acknowledge that fact, discuss honestly, patiently, and consistently what they understand to be happening, and are as transparent as possible. During times of uncertainty, burying your head in the sand is the quickest way to breed skepticism and distrust among those who look to you for answers, direction, and leadership.

2. Recognize What Will NOT Change

Not *everything* is changing, and that's important to talk about, too. Keeping your organization's vision, mission, and goals crystal clear in the minds of your employees is crucial. Remind them that even though the delivery and management of healthcare is transforming, the big picture remains the same: maintaining a patient-first mentality at all times, delivering the best, most compassionate healthcare, and embracing and implementing innovation.

3. Remain Flexible

Thinking creatively and remaining agile and adaptive to change is key. Stay strong and open-minded to finding innovative solutions to complex problems, knowing that even though methods may change, goals will remain the same.

4. Communicate Often and With Confidence

Maintain a positive and supportive company culture. Seek to understand the mindset of your employees—what they are thinking and feeling—and then react with empathy, authenticity, and integrity. Be a good listener. Encourage open conversations and offer as much transparency as you can. Be prepared to hear things that might make you uncomfortable. Acknowledge when you don't have the answers. This will go a long way to allay fear and distrust among employees. Be a source of positive motivation. Exude courage and let your employees know that you are prepared to address whatever changes are coming.

5. Recruit Strong Leaders

Hiring talented individuals with a growth mindset who can ride the wave of uncertainty with an eye to the future will keep your organization moving forward. Look for motivated and positive thinking individuals with innovative ideas and the fortitude to make them real, workable solutions.

6. Invest in Education

Edgar J. Curtis, FACHE, President and Chief Executive Officer of Memorial Health System in Springfield, IL and Chairman of the Board for the IL Health and Hospital Association believes employee education is key in times like these. “We focus on educating and developing our leaders, physicians, and employees to respond nimbly to changes involving people, places, projects, and processes,” he says. “Our Center for Learning and Innovation utilizes experiential learning techniques and simulated scenarios to teach our healthcare workforce to better navigate through disruptive change.”

7. Be Proactive

Bill Murphy, Jr., author of *The Intelligent Entrepreneur*, has said, “Plans are nothing. Planning is Everything.” Staying ahead of the game by anticipating when strategic changes in regulation, process, administration, and patient care will be needed provides assurance that your organization is prepared to deal with whatever comes your way. Scenario planning is very important. Thinking through various scenarios that could occur because of changes will keep your organization nimble. Maintaining a proactive stance during uncertain times requires thoughtful decision-making and intelligent risk-taking. It means studying well-tracked data and quality metrics to anticipate change as much as possible and determining the best response to that change. Having a team in place that understands how those changes may affect the organization only solidifies the confidence others will feel in your organization's ability to prevail.

8. Turn Challenges into Opportunities

Effective leaders leverage dilemmas to enhance their organization's strategy for success. They are “out-of-the-box” broadminded thinkers who are masters at the art of innovation. They embrace the unknown, finding silver linings and progressive ways to approach challenges; they are positive. According to Curtis, “Leaders who have a positive approach and a strong passion for their work can help organizations navigate uncertain terrain by staying true to a compelling mission—improving healthcare.” He adds: “Positive leadership can also serve to increase workforce engagement and bring everyone on-board.” After all, leaders do not live in a bubble; they collaborate across departments, internal and external, to find productive solutions and to challenge existing ideas. Effective leaders help their organization not only *survive* upheaval but flourish in the midst of it.

Final Thoughts

The only certainty is that we know change is coming. According to Bob Clarke, CEO at Nubrick Partners, a healthcare talent management consultancy, “while healthcare organizations may be holding off or slowing down on large capital expenditures that do not directly affect patient care, there is not much else that has stalled in this era of ambiguity.” The healthcare industry is ever-evolving and resilient, having just implemented systems and processes to comply with the ACA. No one is paralyzed by fear of the unknown because we can’t be. In fact, at Jordan Search Consultants, we’ve seen an uptick in executive healthcare leadership searches. In these times, organizations want their executive team fully staffed and prepared. While the leadership characteristics we use to vet candidates have not changed, we have begun to weigh them a bit differently. The healthcare leaders of today—and tomorrow—must be adept at the 8 tactics mentioned above, but must also be strategic, flexible, and calculated risk-takers with the knowledge and experience to quickly respond to changing circumstances.



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