Ready to be a High-Performing Physician Leader? Who’s Your Coach?

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Leaders know it can be lonely at the top. Authority isolates and insulates leaders from essential feedback that can be vital for their growth and credibility. Executive coaches fill the gap with confidential assessments, structured feedback systems, tailored mentoring and relevant affirmation. Coaching can turn ordinary managers into extraordinary leaders, setting the stage for outstanding organizational performance.

Physician leaders engage coaches to build high-performing collaborative teams to develop both medical quality and business excellence.

When Performance Counts

What makes the difference between champions and other contenders? In sports, coaches play a vital role. Olympic medalists build relationships with personal coaches, often for years on end, to hone their skills, provide feedback and encouragement, and to maintain accountability for enhancing their performance on the field.

Physician leaders are performers in a field of their own, but their performance as leaders can yield benefits beyond themselves. High-performing physician leaders impact the medical groups they serve, its employees, patients and the broader medical community. Their leadership performance sets the tone for a culture of collaboration, which is becoming the key to profitability as healthcare financing moves from volume-based reimbursement to outcomes-based pay-for-performance systems.

What is Coaching?

Coaching is an emerging discipline, so it can take many forms. The International Coach Federation defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.

Coaching may have had negative connotations in the past, but it is no longer a euphemism for corrective counseling. In recent decades, executive coaching has gone from a tool to correct underperformance to today’s organizational development tool of choice for leaders and emerging leaders. Coaches are confidential advisors skilled in drawing out the best attributes in the leaders they serve. They deploy personality and behavioral assessments, skill-building exercises, feedback and accountability systems, and tactful honesty to refine the personal and professional qualities that drive
executive performance. Coaches help clients strengthen their natural gifts and leverage them for the benefit of the organization. Coaches also help their clients understand the barriers to their performance and establish goals to overcome them.

Coaching relationships typically are time-limited, ranging from six to eighteen months, with monthly conversations of one or two hours. Coaches may supplement the personal conversations with reading assignments or additional training on specific skills. About 75% of coaching conversations are face-to-face encounters. Phone and email conversations can also be effective when distance is a barrier. Some leaders find that the benefits of coaching warrant an ongoing relationship that can last for years.

### Who Can Benefit From Coaching?

Physician leaders may earn their position as a leader on the basis of their reputation for medical excellence, but leadership skills are distinctly different from medical skills. A physician who is new to leadership may find it difficult to achieve the same level of effectiveness he has come to expect of himself as a physician. Coaching can accelerate the learning curve for physicians new to leadership responsibilities.

Coaching is most effective when leaders are ready to learn and open to change. Physician leaders who recognize their potential for their personal growth and the impact it could have for their organization are poised to benefit most. Coaching focuses on behavioral skills more than cognitive knowledge, so leaders must be vulnerable enough to examine and modify long-standing assumptions, perceptions and habits.

Physician leaders may also want to engage a coach for their administrator. The Medical Group Management Association tracks better-performing medical groups through the results of their annual Physician Production and Compensation surveys. Their research shows that one of the qualities of high-performing groups is a strong relationship between the physician leader and the administrator. Individual coaching leverages the capacity of each and magnifies the effectiveness of the team.

### Qualities to Look For in a Coach

Finding an appropriate coach may be more challenging than it seems. Although training and certification programs are available, the discipline has not yet reached the level of other professions with established standards, licensure and regulations.

The Harvard Business Review published a 2009 study addressing the realities of executive coaching. The researchers asked seasoned coaches to
prioritize the qualities leaders should look for when selecting a coach. The top two qualities cited were that the coach should have experience in a similar setting and a clear methodology for coaching. All other factors, including certification or experience as a psychological therapist, were considered less significant.

In my experience as both a leadership coach and as leader who has been coached, I would affirm the research findings. Coaching is a personal relationship. Leaders need to be able to trust their coach implicitly, and that trust is often built upon a foundation of relevant experience and a sound coaching methodology. The relationship is often strengthened by an intangible empathetic connection and confidence in the coach’s professionalism. Skilled coaches develop methods for each of the following functions:

- Psychometric testing – conducting assessments to measure personality and natural behavior patterns
- Unearthing core issues – helping the client discern the most valuable goals worthy of their attention and achievement
- Telling the truth constructively – providing relevant feedback in a safe and effective manner without bruising the client’s ego
- Contextual grounding – identifying the dynamics between the leader, close team members, and the organization

**Soft Skills Lead to Hard Results**

The efficacy of executive coaching is more anecdotal than quantifiable, but recent studies have attempted to gauge the return on investment with encouraging results. HR Monthly summarized the research this way:

> “Recent studies show business coaching and executive coaching to be the most effective means for achieving sustainable growth, change and development in the individual, group and organization.”

One of the more common tools used by coaches is a baseline assessment of the client’s emotional intelligence. Researchers have concluded that emotional intelligence is twice as valuable as cognitive intelligence and technical skills combined as a predictor of leadership success. Likewise, the business case for emotional intelligence is compelling. In a pilot project at PepsiCo, executives selected for their emotional intelligence competencies far outperformed their colleagues, delivering:

- 10% increase in productivity
- 87% decrease in executive turnover
- $3.75m added economic value
- over 1000% return on investment
Similar results have been reported in industries as diverse as restaurants, hotels, manufacturing and healthcare. Furthermore, emotional intelligence has been shown to increase with minimal training.

**Get Started**

Physician leaders carry a great responsibility. Those who earn the right to lead by virtue of their clinical reputation face a steep learning curve as they acquire leadership skills. Their colleagues and subordinates will have great expectations, and the organization stands to benefit from wise decisions and visionary actions.

Recent developments in healthcare reform in the U.S. have thrust physician leaders into the spotlight. The new focus on outcomes-based reimbursement is driving hospitals and physicians to collaborate like never before, and setting the stage for physicians to take the lead in designing and implementing innovative models for delivering high quality patient care. Medical skills and business acumen will need to become intertwined to achieve the nation’s noble objectives, and physician leaders will be asked to lead the way. To rise to the occasion, physician leaders can rapidly grow their skills and nurture their instincts through a relationship with an executive coach.

**About the Author**

Ken Hekman is a medical management consultant and executive coach with over thirty years of thought leadership experience in the healthcare industry. In addition to an MBA, he is a Fellow in the American College of Medical Practice Executives and a Registered Leadership Coach. He is the author of six books and numerous articles in the medical management field. He can be reached at Ken@hekmangroup.com.