

Engage and Align with Physicians

No one argues with doing what is right for patients. The art of servant leadership is finding ways to make it easier for members of the healthcare team to operationalize. The best leaders respond with “How?” not “No.”

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PHYSICIAN–ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONSHIPS are often cast as adversarial, even diametrically opposed. But why? Perhaps strong professional boundaries, confusing payment structures, different foci, unaligned processes, and practice incentives cause the divide.

However, the two groups are basically in sync. The physician wants the best possible care for her patients. And although administrators are necessarily more wedded to the organization’s bottom line, they want exactly the same thing. So acknowledging at the outset that their goals align is a positive place to begin.

How well you work with physicians is a major predictor of how successful you’ll be as a healthcare executive. Many administrators who are successful at forging strong, honest, and respectful relationships with physicians are granted oversight of their organization’s

hiring decisions because they've got a good track record of developing close personal and professional bonds.

When you engage and align yourself with physicians, you establish partnerships that make for the best patient care possible. So how do you do that?

- **Understand what physicians want.** Administrators should view problems from the physicians' vantage as well as their own and come up with solutions that give a nod to both sides. If you don't have a sense of what physicians want, ask. Be clear about what's at stake, and listen. Make sure that decisions aren't of the winner-take-all variety. Compromise so that both sides get something they want and no one feels they got the short end of the stick.
- **Build relationships.** Get to know your physicians. Ask them to describe the problems they face, and then help them find routes to meaningful and permanent solutions. Be the first to offer support for an issue, and grant favors that are within your power, big and small. Be a servant leader—someone who makes it easier for doctors to do their job. And be humble about it. Your ethic and efforts will be valued, remembered, and likely returned in kind.
- **Stand tall in your own skin while still maintaining humility.** Don't be fearful, intimidated, or starstruck by physicians' knowledge, power, or multiple academic degrees; they are human beings with pasts, wishes, fears, and goals just like you. Dealing comfortably with smart, successful physicians is crucial for your career as a healthcare executive. Remember, their role is different but not necessarily more important. So be confident in your dealings with physicians. Like anyone, physicians can smell intimidation and may use it to their advantage—or as an excuse not to take you seriously.

- **Do what you say you will do.** Doctors and administrators often work in different time zones when it comes to decision making. Physicians need information for the diagnosis and treatment of their patients and often make decisions on the spot with the data they have. Thus, a physician may make numerous decisions about multiple patients in the same 30-minute visit to a patient floor. Administrators, on the other hand, need to get input and buy-in from others and must spend time investigating problems and researching apt solutions before solidifying their decision. For example, an administrator may spend many months working on next year's budget. So remember doctors' time constraints, and if you say you will get back to them, do it—or else you'll lose credibility. Be as prompt as possible.
- **Be flexible and accommodating.** It's the nature of the beast: Physicians have chaotic, intensely busy days with back-to-back patients, and they often have trouble making it to your office on time—or even during the business day. Therefore, go where they are: Be available when they have some downtime between surgeries, meet them in the doctors' lounge, or stop by their office after their last patient of the day. Don't make a big deal about bending over backwards—simply anticipate that you'll need to accommodate them.
- **Speak respectfully to and about your physician colleagues.** Never complain about physicians to anyone, and never engage in conflict with a doctor in public. Your physician colleagues must feel that you are trustworthy and respectful and that you value them, their role, and their work. Expect the same of them.
- **Do your best to involve physicians in decisions and plans.** Often, physicians are brought in at the last minute to approve a new piece of equipment, lend support for a

new program, or confirm a forthcoming policy change. They're busy, of course. But although they may not be able to attend meetings or thoroughly read the material you send to them, they do likely want to be involved in decisions that affect their work. Figure out how to include them in your organization's processes and decisions early on so that it's not a fire drill for support when decision time comes.

- **Identify and ally yourself with informal physician leaders.** A few physicians have powerful medical and social influence—as well as the intense respect of their colleagues. Though it may not be readily apparent early on in your tenure who these individuals are—particularly given that many thought leaders aren't necessarily the most vocal—do your best to seek them out and establish rapport and trust with them.
- **Be consistent in your messages.** Sometimes a healthcare manager says no to a physician, and the physician then appeals to the CEO, who reverses the decision. This kind of sequence not only disempowers the original manager; it also undermines respect for other managers and sends the message to physicians that the administrative team lacks consensus. Before saying yes or no to a physician's request, limit your authority by saying that you need to check with others who know more about the issue than you.
- **Reward and recognize.** Physicians offer a great deal of themselves, their time, and their energy to patient care and service for your organization, and although they enjoy a certain degree of glory, everyone likes to be thanked. You can recognize physicians' commitment in both financial and nonmonetary ways, but remember that a financial reward must come in tandem with a meaningful thank-you (especially given that a \$1,000 bonus on its own might seem a little anemic to a physician making

six figures). Sending a handwritten thank-you note is an effective and memorable way to personalize your appreciation for a physician.

Early in your career, get in the habit of learning as much as you can about your physician colleagues, both personally and professionally. Learn the language of and be interested in medicine as best you can. Read about health issues, and express genuine curiosity about what the doctors you work with do and face. Ask if you can spend time observing them in the operating room or accompanying them on rounds.

Remember, you're both there for the same reason: to do what is best for the patient.

EXERCISE 1

Spend time with physicians. Learn what they do. Ask to observe them in the operating room or on rounds.

EXERCISE 2

Learn the clinical language of physicians. Take a medical terminology course. Practice reading the operating room schedule and looking up words you don't know.

RESOURCES

- Bujak, J. S. 2008. *Inside the Physician Mind: Finding Common Ground with Doctors*. Chicago: Health Administration Press.
- Fields, R. 2011. "7 Reasons Hospitals Struggle to Align with Physicians." *Becker's Hospital Review*. Published July 29. www.beckershospitalreview.com/hospital-physician-relationships/7-reasons-hospitals-struggle-to-align-with-physicians.html.