



Communication is the most important leadership trait

By Rob Cosinuke | July 15, 2016

In the past year, Mark H. Belfer, D.O., FAAFP, chief medical officer at Greater Rochester Independent Practice Association, rolled out a new area of focus for his physicians – and took to the open road. He put 27,000 miles on his car as he visited face-to-face with all of his providers, with the goal of aligning them around the mission.

Belfer shared this anecdote during a recent Advisory Roundtable event convened by athenahealth. The Advisory Roundtables bring together healthcare executives from across the country to discuss challenges and opportunities around a given topic – in this case, population health.

And Belfer suggested that a key to population health – indeed, to any healthcare initiative – is communication.

“You cannot over-communicate for primary care physicians,” Belfer said at the event. “If you want to be successful, you have to have physician leadership. That’s important. But if you don’t communicate the vision, communicate how to use the tools, communicate everything over and over and over and over, one on one, it will not work.”

Belfer’s experience mirrors the findings from athenahealth’s 2016 Physician Engagement and Leadership Index. The survey, conducted last spring through the Epocrates app, aimed to better understand more than 2,000 physicians’ opinions about their organizations’ leadership, and how it relates to their overall satisfaction.

Through the survey results, we were able to identify the leadership traits most valued by physicians with respect to their organizations’ vision, culture, and day-to-day operations.

And we found that, whether or not they’re satisfied with their leadership, physicians overwhelmingly cite the ability to communicate as the most important skill for healthcare management. Communication was also the top leadership skill physicians cited as the area of improvement that would most benefit the organization.

And when the survey dug into why physicians gave their leaders poor scores, the most common response was poor communication. The next two most frequent responses – not serving as advocates for patients and staff, and being out of touch – have a lot to do with communication, too.

Traits and Behaviors of Ideal Leader

	% of 2,011 total respondents
Management Skills	73%
Communication	35%
Incoming Communication	22%
• Good listener	14%
• Takes feedback/input from others	4%
Outgoing Communication	15%
• Good communications	9%
• Transparent	4%
Forward-Thinking	19%
Forward-thinking/visionary	11%
Insightful/innovative/creative	4%
Work Skills	13%
Productivity (organized)	8%
Staff management	6%
Advocacy	11%
Staff/employee advocate	8%
Patient advocate	4%

SOURCE: athenaResearch

So what can leaders do to bridge the communication gap?

Communicate a compelling, strategic vision

Perhaps the most important responsibility of the healthcare leader is to define and communicate the organization’s strategic vision. But the survey revealed that only 45 percent of physicians say that their organization’s vision is communicated well, and only 40 percent of respondents said they’d describe that vision as personally inspiring. Only 33 percent said the organization’s vision is embraced by employees.

Jim Collins, a leadership professor and author of “Good to Great” – arguably one of the most important business leadership books ever written – describes the building blocks of vision this way:

Vision is simply a combination of three basic elements: (1) an organization’s fundamental reason for existence beyond just making money (often called its mission or purpose), (2) its timeless unchanging core values, and (3) huge and audacious – but ulti-

mately achievable – aspirations for its own future (I like to call these BHAGs, or Big Hairy Audacious Goals). Of these, the most important to great, enduring organizations are its core values.

Too many healthcare organizations have vague mission or vision statements with vanilla phrases such as “provide the highest quality of care” or “improve the health of our patients.” Leaders must create a way to make physicians feel as if they are part of something bigger than themselves. And that starts with clearly communicating a unique vision or mission, and explaining how physicians’ work aligns toward that common purpose.

Open the pathways for conversation

Before you can build a compelling vision, you have to know who you are speaking to and what they care about. Interestingly enough, the survey showed that “incoming communication” – being a good listener and taking input and feedback from others – is more important to physicians than “outgoing communication” as an ideal leadership trait.

Indeed, 14 percent of respondents cited being good at receiving communication from others as the single most important healthcare leadership trait, compared to 9 percent for effectiveness at outgoing communications and 4 percent for transparency.

In other words, leaders need to listen more than anything else.

Create space for feedback and conversation. Get out and seek input. Walk the halls, set up one-on-ones, and hold feedback sessions. Think about Mark Belfer, driving around his state to meet individually with each of his practice leaders. If leaders aren’t proactively listening, chances are they are setting themselves up for failure.

Rob Cosinuke is executive director of the Leadership Forum. Image credit: Jrcasas Getty Images



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