



Five TV hospital executives who set the mold for engaging physicians

By Chelsea Rice | August 4, 2016

Medical shows are a staple of television, with the daily life of a hospital providing ample storytelling drama, angles, and possibilities. But with those storylines comes an under-appreciated TV trope: The doctors' boss.

Like their real-life counterparts, the hospital administrators running the show on TV are hardly one-dimensional, and their strategies for wrangling a coordinated care team are remarkably realistic.

athenahealth's 2016 Physician Leadership and Engagement Index revealed how the quality of leadership affects the engagement of physicians on the front lines and on TV it's no different.

Here are five TV hospital executives with unique leadership traits who have set the mold for engaging physicians. Perhaps one of these characters reminds you of someone?

Intimidator with a soft spot



Dr. Bob Kelso, Chief of Medicine: "Scrubs"

The chief of medicine on NBC's "Scrubs," Kelso comes across as a sadistic, bottom-line driven administrator. Though he's charged with teaching residents, he couldn't be less sympathetic to their needs, and he sees up-and-coming doctors as a necessary evil.

Despite his unpredictable heartlessness (and split personality), Kelso has a thinly-veiled compassion for patients and staff – and in a few vulnerable moments, he reveals that he doesn't want to alienate himself from the team.

But athenahealth's research suggests that an autocratic approach creates barriers to effective team dynamics. Communication, trust, and a supportive working relationship connect physicians to their organizations. The opposite? Well, perhaps that's why there's so much hilarious dysfunction in "Scrubs."

The physician wrangler



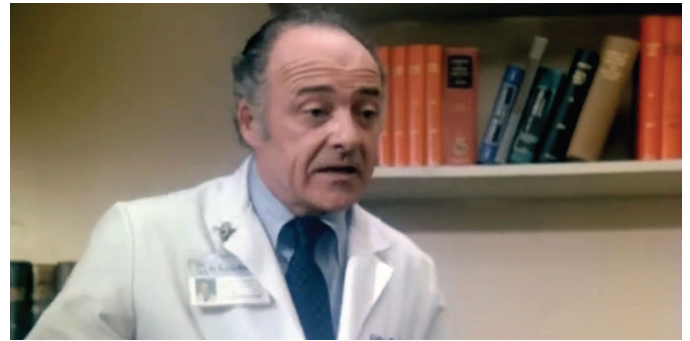
Lisa Cuddy, Dean of Medicine, Chief Hospital Administrator: "House, M.D."

The dean of medicine and chief hospital administrator in FOX's "House, M.D.," Dr. Cuddy's primary role seems to be reining in the brilliant but rebellious Dr. House. But despite their clashing personalities — she's a risk-averse rule follower, while he sees risk as the way to solve complex diagnostic cases — her strong clinical reputation gives her solid ground in confrontations.

At times she even steps in to mentor the physicians House can sometimes leave directionless. Cuddy steers the hospital with a strong hand, and manages large egos with a nuanced bit of push and pull.

According to athenahealth research, leadership liaisons between the boardroom and clinicians are an effective way to build strong physician engagement. Someone as even-tempered as Cuddy, who is willing to fight the good fight on both ends, might be exactly the kind of personality it takes to keep everyone feeling valued, productive, and engaged.

The heart of the hospital



Dr. Donald Westphall, Director of Medicine: "St. Elsewhere"

The director of medicine at St. Eligius hospital, Dr. Donald Westphall leads with a compassionate, patient-centered style that endears him to the staff. For clinicians, he's always lending a supportive shoulder to lean on — and sometimes, cry into.

When physicians indicate that they trust their leaders, and feel that the organization follows through on its commitments to employees, athenahealth's index shows they are engaged at three to four times the average rate.

But (spoiler alert!) Westphall's soft spot eventually becomes his downfall. In a story not unfamiliar to health-care executives today, the hospital's clinical and community needs are pitted against bottom-line business demands. In the final season of St. Elsewhere, a larger HMO system takes over St. Eligius, and the problematic Dr. John Gideon is brought in as the new CEO.

Polarizing personality with a heart of gold



Dr. Kerry Weaver, Chief of Staff: "E.R."

An administrator who sometimes drowns her staff in the bureaucracy and paperwork, Dr. Kerry Weaver of NBC's "E.R." is hardly a hospital favorite. She arrived at County General as chief resident under Dr. Mark Greene, then became an attending physician, eventually gets promoted to chief of emergency medicine, and finally becomes hospital chief of staff. She's determined not to let a disability, that requires her to walk with a crutch, hold her back.

Dr. Weaver's strong personality can be both backbiting and heroic, stern and compassionate. While she has some close professional relationships, her closed-off personality and polarizing disposition create a divide among the staff, her clinical smarts transcend any personal grudges.

Research shows that high-quality physician leadership can improve engagement, even in organizations that aren't physician-led. Over a season, County General's E.R. might get a call or two "from the suits on the sixth floor," but at this fictional teaching hospital, physicians are running the show.



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Everyone's mentor



Dr. Richard Webber, Chief of Surgery: "Grey's Anatomy"

With a fatherly attention to his residents and staff, Dr. Webber – known as "Chief" – rotates through a variety of leadership roles through the ups and downs of his personal life.

And he has a paternal role – quite literally – in at least three of his employees' lives (one biologically, one by marriage, and one emotionally with Dr. Meredith Grey). He's a compassionate, caring, accomplished surgeon and teacher, who shares very personal parts of himself with his staff.

Indeed, Seattle Grace has a culture of transparency, upward and downward, which surely owes to Webber's role as liaison. And that trust translates into action: Doctors are more willing to admit mistakes and more forthright about administrative politics.

What personality types and TV leaders did we leave out?

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