

Follow the Leaders...

How & Why Anyone Can Take on the Role of Leadership

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"Leadership is the art of getting someone to do something you want done because he wants to do it."

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

It's easy to accept the notion that leaders are confined only to those who have been given the title of "manager" or "boss". But for a moment, you should try to imagine something different. Take a few minutes and try to see a workplace in which every employee does what it takes to help the organization reach its goals—a place where everyone is a leader. Sound impossible? It's not. Things are changing. It's the 21st Century. And it's time to envision a new concept of leadership.

A New Definition of Leadership

When you think of a workplace in which anyone can be a leader, you probably see a place full of chaos and anarchy. Quite the contrary. In fact, spreading leadership and decision-making responsibilities can liberate, inspire, and motivate everyone to achieve more and contribute the maximum.

Quite simply, anyone who decides to make an impact on the values and goals of the organization can be a healthcare leader. A leader is anyone who takes a role of responsibility at any level of the facility. Indeed, it's the employee who understands why even the most menial task is important, who will make a positive impact on both productivity and business results.

A facility in which certain employees take on the roles of leadership can prove to be very beneficial. After all, the boss can't keep watch every waking second of the day, nor should she/he have to. If your healthcare organization plans to succeed in the competitive world market of today, creating and nurturing an environment in which anyone can take on the role of leadership is worth your time.

One Important Note

Before we dive into what it takes to be a leader, how to spot a leader, and how to create a culture in which employees can emerge as a leader, it's important to make a few clarifications. First, by stating that anyone can be a leader we're not trying to say that employees can or should take over the rights and responsibilities given to the boss or manager. Second, we're not suggesting that you go and give every employee the title of leader. The main point here is to be open to the idea that any employee, no matter what rank he or she is on the "totem pole" can take on the task of being a positive role model. By exerting some key characteristics (which will be identified later) and a good attitude, this person can influence other employees and help create a better workplace. In that sense, he or she is being a leader.

Discovering Effective Leaders at Your Workplace

Spotting the individuals who possess effective leadership skills shouldn't take more than some brief observation on your part. You may notice that other workers feel drawn to a certain employee. You may be able to discern that after being in contact with this individual, other employees feel uplifted, inspired and/or motivated. Although no one has ever been able to come up with a perfect formula for leadership characteristics, effective leaders are usually people who possess one or all of these traits:

- Responsible
- Hard worker
- Compassionate
- Supportive
- Sets worthy goals and achieves them
- Helps other people achieve their goals
- Sets an overall positive example for others to follow
- Tolerates criticism
- Has a willingness to take risks

Effective leaders also use techniques to communicate their belief that each employee is important. Good leaders will speak of employees by name, as opposed to job title. They refer to employees as team members, associates, or colleagues, never as subordinates. They make no distinction between "essential" and "non-essential" staff or "professional" and "non professional" staff. Words have power, including the power to make people feel that they are important to the success of an organization. No matter how small or menial a job may seem, a good leader will be able to communicate how that specific job relates to the big picture. In return, that each employee will see how the role he/she plays makes a contribution to the bottom line.

Lastly, effective leaders can push others in the workplace to finish the task at hand—and perhaps more importantly, make them feel good about doing it. Whether it's the CEO or a part time nurse, a good leader knows they need to communicate the "what's in it for you" factor. For example, an effective leader might tell those employees who are seeking advancement that working in teams will present networking chances and lead to greater opportunities. Or perhaps this leader might present a challenging task in such a way that the employee will feel a sense of achievement and empowerment once it's completed.

Now that you know the characteristics that make up an effective leader and are more apt to discover them, you can now begin to prepare yourself and the workplace for an environment that will help these gifted employees thrive.

Preparing Your Facility for a New Style of Leadership

While some healthcare facilities naturally give way to an environment in which leadership can extend to "rank and file" employees, others need a bit of work. There are some fairly simple steps you can take to get your organization ready for the culture change.

AchieveGlobal, a worldwide consulting firm, conducted a leadership study that involved 2,000 people across 450 organizations. The study explored the critical moments when employees at all levels step forward into leadership roles. The findings are summarized in five key strategies the authors call the CLIMB model of leadership effectiveness. The five strategies are as follows: 1) Create a compelling future. 2) Let the customer drive the organization. 3) Involve every mind. 4) Manage work horizontally. 5) Build personal credibility.

Here's how you can set this model into action:

Create a compelling future. Employees will feel more inclined to step up to the challenge of leadership if a powerful vision and mission statement has been defined. If the goals and values of your healthcare organization are clear and compelling, employees will want to take it to the next level.

Let the customer drive the organization. Many successful healthcare organizations continue to evolve and thrive based upon both patient and employee feedback. As you know, your frontline employees probably have the most contact with the customer/patient. These employees hold valuable knowledge as to what the customer wants and needs. In today's healthcare environment, communication needs to remain two-way, with feedback from the customer combined with direction from the employees.

Involve every mind. Try to give employees and teams the responsibility, resources, training and support they need to improve both their work and the organization. Akio Monta, founder and former chairman of Sony, may have perhaps said it best: "A company will get nowhere if all the thinking is left to management. Everybody in the company must contribute and for the lower level employees their contribution must be more than just manual labor. We insist that all our employees contribute their minds."

Manage work horizontally. This simply means delegating work among the entire staff. Passing important tasks throughout the department will help employees build leadership and decision-making skills as well as create trust between you and the department.

Build personal credibility. People will want to follow leaders who they can trust. This means setting a good example by walking the talk all the time.

Final Thoughts

While some employees will naturally take on the role of leadership more so than others, the important thing to remember is that regardless of job title, everyone matters. Though they may not want to take on the responsibility of being a leader or making key decisions, it's key that you create a culture in which employees know that they can be a leader if they so choose. Without this opportunity, your organization stands to lose.