



Grow your own leaders

It's time to develop strategies for recruiting the future leaders of Canada's healthcare organizations

In Canada these days, the demand for capable healthcare leaders is steadily increasing while the supply is quite limited. A leadership gap isn't emerging — it's already here. Some believe the problem is already a crisis. For example, check out the website of the Canadian Health Leadership Network (www.chlnet.ca).

There's no doubt that the leadership cohort in healthcare is aging. Retirements are already having a dramatic impact across the system and this will only increase over the coming decade. In addition, burnout and turnover are serious issues. A recent study of provincial and federal deputy ministers of health found that their average tenure was less than two years.

But the leadership gap is about much more than "churn" in existing positions. There are also important new demands that must be addressed, including those associated with population growth and increasing public expectations. As well, bringing about all the improvements that are required in healthcare requires more leadership, not less.

Open up the career section of any newspaper and it tells the story. Healthcare organizations and executive recruitment firms have never been busier recruiting healthcare leaders.

All this would be fine if there were an adequate supply of up-and-coming leaders to meet the growing demand, but the evidence indicates there's not. Candidate pools for leadership roles are often small, recruiters complain it's increasingly difficult to find qualified candidates, many positions remain vacant for long periods, it's not uncommon for competitions to be re-run, and the number of "acting" positions across the system is worrying. Try recruiting a CEO these days, or a VP of medicine or nursing!

How healthcare undermines itself

In some respects, the healthcare system has been its own worst enemy. Working conditions in healthcare aren't what they should be and this applies as much to those in demanding leadership roles as to those on the front lines. It has become more and more difficult to persuade young professionals to go over to the "dark side" of administration. New work-life values are at play.

The healthcare system undermines itself in other ways. Recruiters look for candidates with experience in similar roles, but with the large, flat organizational structures that have become typical in healthcare, very few individuals have the opportunity to gain the broad experience that recruiters are looking for.

Until recently, leadership development in most healthcare organizations was left to chance. Executive development is a top priority in the private sector, but in healthcare, a planned approach to developing future leaders has been rare. In a recent straw poll of Canadian healthcare executives, for example, 95% admitted that their organizations had no succession plans for senior leaders.

Healthcare is learning the hard way that many of the traditional approaches to securing future leaders aren't effective. These include, for example, relying on the market to produce the required leaders, recruiting from other jurisdictions, or recruiting from non-health sectors. While all these approaches can be important adjunct strategies, on their own they haven't proven to be effective in developing an adequate leadership pipeline for the future.

Leading for life in British Columbia

As a matter of necessity, a number of progressive healthcare organizations in Canada have begun to focus on how leadership is developed and sustained. In particular, there has been a notable interest in adopting a "grow your own" approach. Perhaps the pre-eminent Canadian example is B.C.'s Leaders For Life program (www.leadersforlife.ca). The goal of this program is no less than to insure an adequate supply of future leaders to sustain B.C.'s healthcare system.

Based on a thoughtful consensus on what leadership capabilities are required, Leaders For Life engages employers and educational institutions to support up-and-coming healthcare leaders with an individualized, highly focused, accelerated leadership development program. This includes a self-assessment of leadership capabilities, a 360-degree assessment, development of a detailed, individualized personal learning and development plan, customized career planning assistance, one-on-one coaching, mentoring, structured credit and non-credit courses, online learning, action learning projects, work experience outside the usual workplace, and exposure to international health systems. Candidates also work with their supervisors to apply their learnings in the workplace.

Healthcare renewal and sustainability cannot be achieved without highly skilled and experienced leaders influencing health policy and the delivery of care. A lot is at stake. Educational institutions, funders and employers need to work more closely together to address this important challenge.

That's my take. What's yours? I'd be pleased to hear from you. ■