

Replacing Yourself: Succession Planning for Practice Administrators

How to identify and develop successor for this vital leadership role.

BY ALLAN WALKER

Insightful practice administrators understand that a comprehensive succession plan starts with the realization that they will be “replaced” at some point (because of retirement or winning the lottery, they hope). Implementation of a meaningful succession plan means that successful administrators ultimately will help identify and develop someone to fill their leadership role. Most practical and proactive administrators will want to participate in the process of grooming a successor.

ADMINISTRATOR CHARACTERISTICS

Where does a practice begin the process of discovering its next practice administrator? The process should start with having a firm understanding of what the practice needs in an administrator. Outlined ahead is a set of core competencies that most successful and proven practice administrators possess. While the list may not meet all the needs of every practice, administrators who have these attributes and abilities will be well-positioned to help practices survive or even thrive in trying economic times.

Strong leadership qualities. Excellent practice administrators must have the ability to manage a practice featuring daily demands and diverse personalities. They must earn the respect of the entire team and be the acknowledged “go to” person. They must be strong, diplomatic, and consistent in delivering necessary leadership and direction. Having an intimate understanding of how the workplace operates and insight into the unique practice “culture” is critical to earning and maintaining leader status.

Ability to execute and implement. Many practices have great ideas, insights, and strategies for success. However, with no one to direct and guide the implementation of

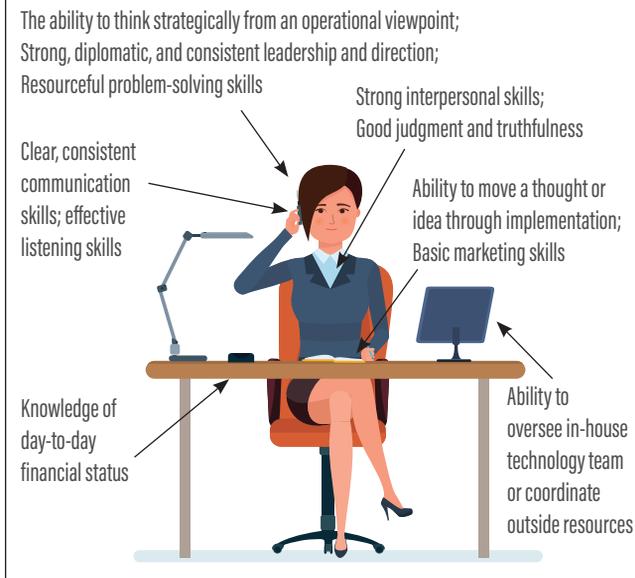
“Many practices have great ideas, insights, and strategies for success. However, with no one to direct and guide the implementation of these plans, nothing gets done. Successful practice administrators can move a thought or idea through implementation to produce the intended result or outcome.”

these plans, nothing gets done. Successful practice administrators can move a thought or idea through implementation to produce the intended result or outcome. Possessing the ability to concentrate on details while keeping the big picture in focus is essential.

Sound communication skills. Lack of crystal-clear communication in any business results in a dysfunctional team. Clear, consistent communication is key, whether it is a face-to-face verbal contact, an e-mail, or a formal written report. Sometimes forgotten or minimized is the need to be an effective listener, one who can respond appropriately to what is being said.

Outgoing people person. Active practice administrators interact with everyone on a regular basis. Strong interpersonal

FEATURES OF YOUR NEXT ADMINISTRATOR



skills are one of the keys to great management. Being a good listener, being fair, firm, and consistent with delegation, discipline, and development reduces conflict and helps ensure a happy and functional work environment. A strong knowledge of human resources and compliance issues is important.

Strategic thinker. Every business needs direction. It is likely that well-rounded practice administrators will be influential members of a practice's think tank, where they will be able to bring a perspective distinct from ownership or staff. Possessing the ability to think strategically from an operational viewpoint is an invaluable asset to any forward-thinking practice and a role best filled by the practice administrator.

Exceptional problem-solving skills. Physicians and owners do not have the time to solve all of the daily problems that arise in a medical practice. Patient time is revenue-generating time. Having a resourceful problem-solver on the team reduces errors and saves valuable time. A practice administrator with the talent to turn problems into solutions and challenges into opportunities can have a substantial impact up and down a practice's organizational chart.

Integrity. Good judgment and truthfulness are a must in any management position. Over time, a practice will assume the style of its most impactful, hands-on leader, frequently the practice administrator. Therefore, it is important for administrators to instill and pass on a can-do attitude built on trust, honesty, respect, and cooperation.

Medical practice finance knowledge. Although any successful medical practice will have adequate financial expertise on staff or available from outside sources, a practice administrator who has a keen understanding of a balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement is very beneficial to a

practice. Having a trustworthy person keeping watch over the day-to-day financial status of a practice frees up the physicians and staff to focus on quality patient care.

Marketing acumen. New patients are the "lifeblood" of any medical practice and helping to develop and manage patient-acquiring marketing strategies and initiatives is a key role for the practice administrator. Depending on the size of the practice, the administrator either will oversee the marketing team or be the marketing team. Either way, possessing knowledge of basic marketing tools and resources is important for any successful practice administrator.

Equipment and technology competence. Today's medical practices run on sophisticated equipment and computer technology. Having a person knowledgeable in this area will save valuable time and money. Again, depending on practice size, the practice administrator will oversee the in-house technology team or coordinate the use of outside resources.

ALL CRITICAL POSITIONS

Today's demanding business climate mandates that practices have an outstanding administrator on their team. Succession planning should be comprehensive and contain the requisite details to fill all critical positions in a practice, including administrator. While you (the current administrator) might not be going anywhere soon, having a thoughtful, accurate, and current job description for an administrator that incorporates the core competencies above will serve a practice well when it comes time to fill that vital role. ■

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