

# Five Steps for Building Your Leadership Skills

Lisa Goren

## You're already a leader in the exam room, but what about beyond?

Lately the health care industry has been abuzz about the importance of physician leadership.<sup>1</sup> Formal leadership programs are popping up within hospitals, and plenty of vendors are getting into the game as well. But most physicians can't take time away from their practice to broaden their skills in this area. The good news is that you can cultivate additional skills without leaving your office or exam room. Here are some simple ways to build your leadership acumen:

**1. Connect with people.** Family physicians are some of the most emotionally intelligent providers, which is why you're so effective at cultivating patient relationships over the long-term. But a physician's social skills inside the exam room do not always translate outside the exam room. Greeting staff members in the morning, giving colleagues direct eye contact, and knowing details about their lives can go a long way toward building trust and credibility as a leader, not just as a clinician.

**2. Know your audience.** Most physicians are adept at using health literacy techniques to communicate more effectively with patients, but it can be easy to ignore these techniques when it comes to team communication. The same rules apply, however. Whenever you have more content knowledge than the person you are speaking with, take into account the other person's comprehension and perspective to ensure mutual understanding.

**3. Assert yourself.** Every day, administrators make decisions that affect physician work without engaging physicians in the planning stages, and physicians are often happy not to be involved. However, the reality is that physicians aren't saving themselves any time or effort.

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### About the Author

Lisa Goren is program director for physician alignment and engagement at Legacy Health in Portland, Ore., where she oversees physician leadership development. Author disclosure: no relevant financial affiliations disclosed.

Often they end up wasting more time in rework after an administrator's decision than if they had provided input in the first place. So, where possible, physicians should proactively involve themselves in the decisions that directly affect their work.

**4. Learn the business.** One of the largest struggles between clinicians and administrators is the tug of war over caring for patients and protecting the bottom line. The business of health care requires operational leaders to understand the challenges of providing high-quality care under current constraints and requires physicians to understand the larger financial context that impacts care delivery. This doesn't require physicians to enroll in MBA programs. There are a slew of online resources available, and with 10 minutes of reading a day, you can become relatively informed about the changes affecting the industry.

**5. Take a risk.** Physicians are giving up an important seat at the table. Without physicians willing to take a risk and assume leadership roles, the health care industry cannot successfully transform. Taking a risk does not have to mean applying to be the chief medical officer of a hospital, but it might mean facilitating a meeting, leading a project, or improving a process.

Physicians are seasoned leaders inside the exam room, but it's time to translate those skills to larger venues. By taking small steps to build leadership skills, physicians will not only improve their own abilities to manage the everyday changes within their practices but also improve their abilities to lead industry transformation. 

1. Stempniak M. Value-based leadership. *Hosp Health Netw.* May 5, 2013. <http://bit.ly/KxyqWQ>. Accessed July 29, 2014.

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