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Jan. 2006

Partnering for Success: Hospital CEOs and the Executive Coach

Hospital CEOs face challenges and often feel the need to bounce ideas off physicians or colleagues. HealthLeaders contributor Leslie Paul Luke says having an executive coach outside of the organization to turn to can be an invaluable asset.

Hospital CEOs face challenging issues every day and often feel the need to bounce ideas off physicians, colleagues, staff members or the person they report to in their organization. As a CEO for 15 years at both rural and urban, nonprofit and for-profit hospitals, this was true for me. At times, however, I found that it was awkward to discuss some of my concerns with the usual group. Perhaps I did not feel comfortable disclosing areas of weakness or revealing my frank assessment of a situation that might offend someone else. When that occurred, it was helpful for me to have an executive coach. An executive coach is someone outside of the organization with whom a CEO can have candid and frank discussions. The coach provides an environment where the CEO is able to freely share his or her thoughts without fear of reprisal, rejection or negative professional consequences. In turn, the coach supplies an atmosphere of trust, frank and open feedback to the CEO, and guidance toward solutions or courses of action. Who can be an effective executive coach? In the past, an executive coach has generally been a mentor who has developed a strong relationship with the CEO. In recent years, professionals who trained to be executive coaches are also considered by the CEO to be an additional resource. In my case, the corporate recruiter who placed me right out of college became my first executive coach as she transitioned to her own consulting practice. She was not only able to work with my hospital team, but provided me with valuable insight into how I could more effectively lead through the hospital's rocky transition during a major cultural shift. By observing our team and using a work behavior inventory, she was able to help me to better understand my leadership style. Most critically, she made me realize that I was very much a team leader and inclusive person under most day-to-day circumstances, but I tended to change into a directive and detail-oriented leader during times of organizational stress. Although we all react to crisis and stress in different ways, my two very different styles were confusing to members of my leadership group. This was a definite "ah-ha" moment for me. With aid from my coach, I was able to develop a more consistent style. I learned to pause long enough in times of stress to rethink my approach and to help the leadership team provide me feedback that would make me more effective. Although this was just one part of a successful cultural shift and turnaround for the hospital, it was very critical to our success. How do you identify and then work with an executive coach? The best executive coach is someone who has had similar healthcare experience and an understanding of organizational behavior. Experience in the healthcare field and, better yet, in hospital operations, gives the coach an empathetic perspective of what it is like for a CEO to work in such a unique environment. Receiving instruction from a person who has "been there" also ensures that the coach shares the same language with the CEO, something that is critical to removing potential communication barriers. CEOs have several options when they want to find an executive coach. First, CEOs can look for someone in an executive position within their own hospital system or healthcare company. This kind of relationship is fairly easy to develop since CEOs regularly interface with their peers and other senior executives. Generally, a CEO's direct supervisor is not the best choice because certain issues may prevent the candor needed in a coaching relationship. Such issues might include operational priorities, the fact that the supervisor does a formal evaluation and pay evaluation of the CEO and the periodic need to talk through sensitive, non-politically correct issues. However, a more experienced chief executive within the organization or an executive several steps removed from the CEO who is seeking the coach may suffice. The benefits of this arrangement are that an executive coach within the organization understands the culture, may be able to arrange for assignments within the organization for the CEO's development and can assist in potential future career moves. Potential issues include the possibility that the coach may be biased by his/her own organizational experiences and may not be well trained in how to be an effective coach. Second, the CEO can look for someone outside of his/her organization. These relationships are a little harder to come by simply because they require good networking skills. In addition, it takes time to develop the trust and relationship that is needed. The benefits and issues with this approach are similar to the first approach. Third, the CEO can look for a professional healthcare executive coach by inquiring with healthcare consulting firms that offer services related to organizational development and leadership. A quick Internet search or a look through healthcare publications can offer

good potential leads. Recommendations from other CEOs can also be invaluable in the search. Once these leads are developed, the CEO should conduct two or three short telephone interviews with potential coaches to determine their qualifications, methods and fees. Most importantly, it will provide the CEO with an initial feeling for how easy it will be to work with that coach. A professional healthcare executive coach should have extensive field experience. This will allow the coach and CEO to have a common language and perspective. In addition, a professional coach with actual CEO experience will have the necessary tools to assist the CEO on a myriad of issues from work style tendencies to the complexities of healthcare finance. A potential issue is the time it will take to develop the CEO/coach relationship compared to the prior two approaches, which assume a pre-existing personal relationship. Whatever approach is used, it is important for the CEO to ask the coach for his/her commitment. This is especially true for non-professional coaches because they will generally be providing the coaching for free but may be very busy with their own careers. Coaching takes time and commitment to the CEO, and this must be agreed upon up front. In addition, the CEO and coach need to agree on the ground rules of the relationship, such as how to handle feedback that may not be positive, the regularity of meetings and what topics may need to be covered. For a coach and CEO relationship to succeed and be productive, four major requirements are necessary:

- **Confidence and candor.** The coach and CEO must be able to have a trusting and open environment in which to discuss some difficult and sensitive topics. There must be absolute agreement that all things discussed will be kept under strictest confidence in order to set the stage for open and honest discussion. The CEO must have sufficient belief that the coach will provide honest, direct and qualified feedback and advice. Most importantly, the CEO must know that the coach has his or her best interest foremost in mind. This, by itself, makes facing weaknesses or blind spots easier to deal with.
- **Rapport.** Rapport is the honest and easy communication that facilitates an excellent professional relationship between the CEO and coach. It is built over time; however, people often describe good rapport as something that is based on shared values, ideas and goals. The executive should find a coach whose general leadership and life values are aligned with his own.
- **Respect.** There should exist a desire on both parties to appreciate each other's perspectives and input while encouraging frank discussion. The CEO needs to respect the coach's past experience, expertise and ability to contribute to her career. In turn, the coach must respect the CEO's current experiential circumstances, paradigms and style. Once this mutual respect is established, the coach and CEO can work with current reality toward mutually agreed upon goals.
- **Hearing and action on CEO's part.** All of the advice offered by the best coach is wasted unless the CEO truly hears what the coach is saying and then takes action. If this doesn't occur, progress will not occur and positive results will be difficult to come by. Generally, however, if the first three requirements have been met, this requirement should come naturally.

With a coach readily available, a CEO has a silent partner to turn to for help dealing with organizational issues and leadership style. The coach's past experiences can provide perspectives, answers and education that the CEO will be able to tap into. The result will be a CEO who will make fewer errors in judgment, go through the career learning curve with much greater speed and move with greater confidence from one success to another.

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