



## Shaping Leadership

*Use executive coaching to develop effective physician leaders*

BY ROBERT KURTZ

Nobody becomes a skilled physician or an effective leader just by reading a book, says Jane Thilo, MD, founder and chief executive officer of Leaders Go First, a provider of executive coaching services based in Bellevue, Washington.

“The ability to provide strong leadership takes a lot of work and practice,” says Thilo, who is also an anesthesiologist and previously served as a medical director and business administrator of an ASC. “When physicians can learn to become effective leaders, they can really inspire their staff to deliver the highest quality patient-centered care and practice fiscal responsibility.”

A strong physician leader can play a pivotal role in the success of an ASC, says Jason Davidson, founding principal of executive coaching

firm PicketFenceConsulting in Orange County, California. “They will not just be regarded for their clinical excellence and standing in the community as physicians but will also have functional responsibility for the growth and direction of the organization,” he says. “They can help establish a culture to empower staff at all levels—both management and line staff—to not only work harder but have goals that are aligned throughout the organization. There are missed opportunities when physicians are not similarly aligned and leading the way.”

With full schedules that often do not allow time for them to return to school to study management, physicians are turning to executive coaching to help them become better managers and leaders, Thilo says.

“An executive coach can really help a physician,” she says. “The leader can receive immediate help on specific issues of leadership that would often take a long time to learn about in school. It is one-on-one, real-time teaching.”

### Numerous Benefits

Executive coaches can help physicians accomplish a wide range of objectives, Davidson says.

“Coaches will work with physicians early in the engagement to identify goals and skills the physician is working to improve upon,” he says. “An important piece of the coaching session is also to provide a forum for physicians to vent and bring other issues to the table without worrying about the fact that these issues may not be directly tied to the top goals. Coaching presents an opportunity to discuss such issues and problem solve other professional challenges they may be facing.”

Michelle Burns, founder of Design Your Destiny, a provider of personal and professional coaching services based in Le Sueur, Minnesota, and an International Coach Federation professional certified coach, says many physicians lack an objective sounding board within their organization, and an executive coach can fill this void.

“To simply have a place to voice concerns, frustrations or get an impartial opinion on something is a hugely valuable part of executive coaching,” she says. “Oftentimes, physicians may feel too vulnerable as leaders to even explore those areas when everyone is looking to them for strength. Since they know my job as a coach is to help them achieve the outcomes they want, it can be easier for them to speak openly with me.”

Davidson adds, “Coaching is not about rooting out the physician’s weaknesses but to truly work together from two different perspectives in order to develop skills and ensure the success of the leader. There should be an open, safe communication channel between the two parties.”

One common area of focus for executive coaches working with physicians is “emotional intelligence,” Thilo says. “That is a person’s ability to recognize and manage their own emotions, and then recognize the emotions of others and manage relationships. Those types of skills are not necessarily focused on in medical school or during our training as physicians. They really make all the difference when you come into a situation where you are in a leadership position and managing employees and you have to motivate other people to come together to do the work that needs to be done.

“An executive coach can help to shortcut the process to developing emotional intelligence, which can differentiate a top performer from an average performer,” she adds.

“When people are open to sharing their own developmental process with others, it gives permission for everyone in the organization to make mistakes and develop.”

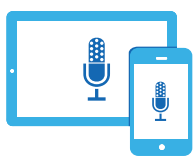
—Jane Thilo, MD  
*Leaders Go First*

An executive coach also can help physicians maintain better control of their professional lives, Burns notes. “There are so many demands placed on physicians, and so many changes happening in health care. This can challenge any physician. Coaches can help that leader stay grounded within their

values, strengths and all of the other skills they bring to the team. An executive coach can help physicians sort their priorities concerning those multiple demands while providing feedback and accountability.”

Executive coaching also can empower physicians to become stronger self-evaluators, Thilo says. “We help physicians reflect on their actions. For example, after a meeting, we would want to help them think about what went well and what could have been done better. Throughout the coaching process, physicians are tasked with evaluating their progress and identifying particular gaps they might want to focus on.”

One of the most significant skills executive coaching can help with is teaching physicians that it is acceptable



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to ask for help, Davidson says. “The coach’s role is not to be the sole person the coaching client comes to for assistance. Rather, the coach’s role is to help the client build their network of wise counsel and advisers, and to really help the coaching client understand how to ask for help and where they should be reaching out for that help.”

To further support this effort, Davidson says there is often great value in using a “dyad coaching model” when working with physicians. “This is when a physician is paired with both a leadership coach and a physician mentor in the organization. I think this approach often brings real benefits to the coaching client in terms of both clinical mentor perspective as well as outside, one-step removed advice.”

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Burns says leaders who invest in executive coaching on their own initiative find the experience rewarding. “It is exciting to work with them because they are striving to ensure that the quality of their leadership is top notch. That says a lot about them.”

Thilo says that there is sometimes a perception that engaging with a coach is a sign of weakness or a form of punishment. Once an individual starts working with a coach, however, that perception usually changes.

“I have been in organizations with a leader who began working with a coach and made it public knowledge,” she says. “When people see that person really improving and growing, all of a sudden, everyone wants a coach. It can quickly become the gold standard. When people are open to sharing their own developmental process with others, it gives permission for everyone in the organization to make mistakes and develop. It is a way to learn and grow and really sets the stage for creating a learning environment.” <<

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