

The Executive Journey: 10 Steps for the Early Careerist



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Early in their careers, professionals often have in mind a set goal they want to achieve. In healthcare, it might be to become a CEO, CFO or CMO, or it might be more ambiguous such as “to find a role where I can help the most people.” Whatever their goal, we encounter many early careerists who wish to become executives someday but aren’t sure if they have what it takes, or how to get there.

In this article – a collaboration between WittKieffer and the National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives (NALHE) – we hope to provide some helpful advice about the journey to becoming a top executive. We use the word “journey” very purposefully, because rarely does one’s career take a straight line and there will be many unexpected encounters along the way.

1. Choose Your Path (Knowing It May Change). There are a variety of paths to take to one day get to a senior executive position. There is the more traditional fast track that includes, for example, getting valued degrees from notable institutions and finding positions of increasing responsibility to give you administrative, operational and financial experience. In healthcare many executives pursue fellowships and eventually become fellows of ACHE. But there are just as many executives these days who take nontraditional routes to becoming senior leaders. They may come from other industries outside healthcare, or may move sideways in their roles rather than always

climbing the ladder. If you want to become an executive, find a path that works for you as long as you are acquiring knowledge and experience along the way.

2. Don’t Let Your Age Interfere with Your Ambitions.

There is no right age at which to reach the executive ranks. In fact, organizations are lucky to have a diversity of ages (and different generations) represented on their leadership teams. If you come to healthcare leadership later in your career, seek out organizations such as NALHE, NAHSE, ACHE, HFMA and others to mingle with peers and help you learn.

One caveat for women: There can be discrimination toward career-minded women of child-bearing age or toward mothers. Ensure you are respected for your skills and wisdom and not judged on expectations regarding your personal life.

3. Hone Your Soft Skills. While you’re burnishing your resume, don’t forget to take time to improve yourself as a person and colleague. Communication skills are critical. There is a cultural competency associated with it. How do you build relationships, forge friendships and get buy-in from people? Learn how to listen as well as how to talk—and don’t feel threatened by the talent around you. Whether you’re an extrovert, introvert or somewhere in between, you can excel as a communicator.

- . One way to become a communicator: As an aspiring healthcare executive, get to know people in your organization from A to Z. Be a visible leader. Walk the halls. Introduce yourself to all staff. These types of activities help you develop the parts of you that are essential for executive success.
- 4. Find (and Cherish) Mentors and Sponsors.** Look for people in your professional life to guide you to the executive suite. Remember it's about quality over quantity—one great mentor can really boost your career or get you to take the leap to a new role. We see many executives who have mentors of the same age or even younger. It just needs to be a person you can bounce ideas off of and with whom you can collaborate.
- . As for sponsors, they are in short supply (especially for people of color). If you happen to be lucky enough to find a good sponsor – someone to advocate for you as you rise in your career – cherish the role they play and show them your appreciation. One word of advice: Make sure your sponsor understands what your needs and desires are (not what they think your needs and desires are). You and your sponsor should be on the same page about what's best for your career.
- 5. Build Relationships with Executive Recruiters.** Executive search consultants can be tremendous allies. The more they know about you and your goals and aspirations, the more they will keep you top of mind when opportunities arise. Look to acquaint yourself with one or two recruiters in your field, and check in with them every so often—a short email or 15-minute phone conversation will do.
- . Executive search consultants are also resume experts. Listen carefully to their advice if you're lucky enough to get it. Notice the things that they call out on your resume (or LinkedIn profile). They can help you “translate” your experiences and qualifications for employers.
- 6. Take “Impostor Syndrome” in Stride.** Most executives we meet are humble and have their moments of vulnerability. It's not unusual for rising executives to feel like impostors from time to time.
- Understand that it's a normal part of a career. If it happens, give yourself a pep talk or reach out to a mentor to advise you. Try to balance your humility with a dose of cockiness.
- . We often see first-generation executives (those who are the first in their families to reach this career level) struggle with impostor syndrome. If this is you, learn to surround yourself with other up-and-coming executives to help you feel comfortable in this environment.
- 7. Keep Stories in Your Toolbox.** We once heard the advice that every professional should have 10 stories in their toolbox. In other words, have about 10 stories that illustrate your successes and capabilities. The stories should present a challenge you faced and explain how you drove through it and came out a better person. Practice your stories of success (and even failure) and learn to pull them out of the toolbox during interviews and when you encounter people who take interest in your career.
- 8. Move Around a Bit.** While there is still much to be said for loyalty to a given employer, we find that professionals who work for different organizations and in different environments are those that develop diverse skill sets. There shouldn't be a timeline for how long you should stay in one role or organization, as long as you have a valid story about why you made a move. This can be a professional reason (e.g., a new challenge) or personal one (e.g., improved quality of life). If you've made career moves for the right reasons, future employers will respect that.
- 9. Embrace the Journey More than the Destination.** You may be eyeing the CEO chair or some other lofty position, which is great. Remember, however, to be willing to change your sights as your life changes. You may get to a certain role and discover that you're completely content without advancing further. We've also seen many executives (especially in the COVID-19 era) take a step down in position in order to improve their quality of life. Be willing to redraw your career map as you evolve and age into a different person.

10. Be a Lifelong Learner. Some executives make the mistake of achieving a certain level and feel it is time for them to stop learning and start bestowing their wisdom upon others. This is a mistake. Realize that even the savviest CEOs still need to learn and change with the times. Be willing to pivot, twist and turn in your career. Always be on the lookout for new technologies or information that may change your market.

- Part of being a lifelong learner is surrounding yourself with people who can teach you. Look to build trust in those around you, to delegate, and to ask questions about things that others are more knowledgeable about. You can never stop becoming a better leader.

About the Authors

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About WittKieffer

WittKieffer is a global executive search firm dedicated exclusively to organizations that improve quality of life in healthcare, education, the life sciences and the not-for-profit sector. Its industry-specialized consultants deliver solutions across the leadership continuum – experienced, emerging and interim – that build long-term partnerships and successful outcomes. The firm understands leadership, people who lead and the impact they have on organizations and society. Visit WittKieffer.com to learn more.

About NALHE

The National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives is a national organization led by Latino/Latina executive leaders of U.S. hospitals and healthcare organizations and experts in the fields of health care policy and practice. NALHE was founded in 2005 to increase senior-level Latino/Latina representation in hospitals and health systems in the United States. Our goal is to create a future workforce of highly talented Latino/Latina healthcare executives who can meet the challenge of delivering and improving healthcare in our diverse communities. Visit nalhe.org to find out more.