

WittKieffer

Healthcare CEO Reimagined: **LEADING HEALTHCARE'S NEXT CHAPTER**



Reimagining Healthcare Leadership



Healthcare leadership stands at an unprecedented inflection point, shaped by economic volatility, policy and regulatory shifting, geopolitical uncertainty, and technological disruption. The role of healthcare CEOs is evolving rapidly, as the margin for error in strategic decision-making narrows and the pace of change accelerates exponentially. Today's healthcare leaders must address a complex web of challenges: post-COVID realizations, financial pressures, digital transformations, skilled talent shortages, workforce wellbeing and safety concerns, and regulatory changes.

What defines effective healthcare leadership in this new reality? How can CEOs create a meaningful impact when decision windows are compressed, individual and team bandwidth is stretched, and external pressures and scrutiny are intensified? Through extensive interviews with CEOs of leading health systems in the U.S. as well as proprietary research, we delve into the complexities of leadership to provide firsthand insights into how successful healthcare leaders are reimagining their imperatives and reshaping their approaches to meet the demands of this new era.

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- Balancing Cultural Dynamics
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- Driving External Engagement

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- Adaptability and Resilience
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- Galvanizing Communication

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Our research reveals a fundamental shift in leadership paradigms.

PARADIGM SHIFT 1: AGILE LEADERSHIP AND CULTURAL ENABLEMENT

Longer-term strategic planning cycles give way to more agile, shorter-term execution frameworks. While grand vision and bold strategic moves remain critical, success increasingly depends on day-to-day discipline, operational prowess, and leadership acumen. The complexity of managing healthcare organizations demands leaders who can maintain organizational focus amid constant disruption while building followership through authentic engagement and genuine collaboration. Developing cultures that accelerate innovation, embrace new solutions, and empower teams to act and decide quickly is paramount.

PARADIGM SHIFT 2: TEAM EFFECTIVENESS AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

In this human-centric industry, the CEO's most profound impact stems from their ability to assemble and nurture the right leadership team. Beyond individual competence, today's healthcare organizations require leaders who can foster trust, navigate complexity with wisdom and urgency, and maintain unwavering alignment with organizational mission and business objectives. The effectiveness of team dynamics has become as essential as strategic execution capabilities. Indeed, the time and effort invested in **how** the team works together is as critical as the focus on **what** the team works on. The ways in which CEOs assess, reflect, and adjust their approaches to building and maintaining trust are foundational to their success.

In this report, we explore the evolving role of healthcare CEOs and uncover the essential qualities, strategies, and mindsets required to thrive in an environment of unmatched complexity and opportunity.

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President and Chief Executive Officer
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Brian Erling, M.D.

President and Chief Executive Officer
Renown Health

John Fernandez

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Brown University Health

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Kenneth Holmen, M.D.

President and Chief Executive Officer
CentraCare

Christopher D. Howard

President and Chief Executive Officer
Sharp HealthCare

Nathan Howell

President and Chief Executive Officer
MaineGeneral Health and
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Laura S. Kaiser

President and Chief Executive Officer
SSM Health

Alan S. Kaplan, M.D.

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Omar B. Lateef, D.O.

President and Chief Executive Officer
Rush University System for Health and Rush
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Emory Healthcare

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President and Chief Executive Officer
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The CEO Agenda



Modern healthcare CEOs face an increasingly challenging leadership imperative: actively driving and safeguarding performance across the organization. The various components of organizational performance — including patient care, operational efficiency, talent management, financial performance, and quality metrics — are typically overseen by key executives in the C-suite. Working together with the leadership team, the CEO, as the chief fiscal steward, ensures the organization's financial stability remains robust and responsive to market demands.

The CEO's unique mandate, however, focuses on fulfilling the organization's purpose and nurturing its long-term health. Across these holistic, interconnected, and nuanced endeavors with far-reaching impact, our research highlights five responsibilities that increasingly dominate the healthcare CEO's agenda today: ensuring strategic agility; managing scale, portfolio, and systemness; balancing cultural dynamics; developing future leaders; and driving external engagement.

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Ensuring Strategic Agility

“People need to believe in what you are doing and enjoy it – the most critical thing for a CEO is cascading the ‘why’ vs. the ‘what’.

— **Omar B. Lateef, D.O.**, President and Chief Executive Officer at Rush University System for Health and Rush University Medical Center

The healthcare landscape keeps changing, requiring CEOs to develop distinctive approaches to strategy. While healthcare organizations have historically followed similar paths, today's market calls for leaders to find unique ways to differentiate their organizations from both traditional competitors and new market entrants. Healthcare CEOs are increasingly aware that following conventional practices may carry greater risks than pursuing uncharted and unexpected strategic choices.

CEOs must guide their leadership teams, boards, and the broader organization through industry complexities while maintaining a clear vision and keeping strategic priorities front and center. Their success depends on their ability to create alignment across the organization and sustain momentum toward key objectives.

“My leadership approach has shifted. Instead of top-down directives, I now focus on creating the vision together. The ‘how’ is a ‘we’ discussion – we will determine together how we will get there. It is about true collaboration.

— **Nathan Howell**, President and Chief Executive Officer at MaineGeneral Health and MaineGeneral Medical Center

The execution of strategy requires a thoughtful weighting between evolution and transformation. While most strategic initiatives represent evolutionary changes that build upon existing capabilities, a few others demand truly transformational shifts. Both frameworks require meticulous planning and deliberate engagement with stakeholders within and outside the organization. Healthcare CEOs must excel at setting strategy, refining it with their boards, articulating it effectively, and sustaining progress during implementation. This includes the ability and willingness to make and execute potentially unpopular but necessary decisions for long-term success. Impactful leaders demonstrate unwavering courage in supporting strategic initiatives through periods of organizational skepticism and market uncertainty, maintaining steady resolve while closely monitoring progress and adapting implementation as needed.

Importantly, today's healthcare CEOs must avoid becoming overly attached to any single strategic direction. The most successful leaders maintain intellectual flexibility and strategic agility, remaining open to both course corrections and the courage to stop and admit failures while ensuring their organizations stay true to their mission and focused on long-term objectives. As market conditions change, CEOs must be rational and thoughtful about adjusting their approach while keeping their teams aligned and engaged.

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Managing Scale, Portfolio, and Systemness

In healthcare, scale is often a topic of discussion. It creates great opportunities for growth, operational efficiency, and talent development. As health systems scale, the CEO's ability to effectively integrate and leverage that scale becomes a critical skill that defines the organization's success or failure. However, unlike industries where scale evolved over generations of leaders, allowing them to gain experience in managing large organizations, rapid consolidation in the healthcare industry presents a unique challenge: leaders must often learn to manage scale in real time, without the benefit of prior experience in similarly sized organizations. This mismatch between organizational scale and leadership experience adds complexity to the industry's evolution and future direction.

“Goal-setting is not just about driving the organization forward; it is about decluttering it from negative inertia. As a CEO, I believe in creating a clear agenda with both short-term and long-term goals to focus our efforts and achieve what truly matters.

— Dennis Murphy, President and Chief Executive Officer at IU Health

Yet, not every challenge can be solved by size alone, and an arbitrary revenue target or footprint size is not the ultimate goal. The real challenge — and opportunity — lies in striking the dynamic balance between capitalizing on scale advantages, such as technology investments, back-office efficiencies, and system-wide best practices, while maintaining the local agility needed for market-specific execution. This “magic” equilibrium requires both strategic wisdom and leadership courage, as the optimal balance point varies based on market context and organizational capabilities.

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The true significance lies in **essentiality** — becoming the trusted, indispensable healthcare provider in chosen communities, so much so that the community could not deliver healthcare without the provider. This market anchoring strengthens the healthcare organization's ability to deliver new models and sites for high-quality care and achieve greater leverage with payers.

Building on this foundation of essentiality, success in healthcare remains inherently local — and this is where strategic portfolio management comes into play. The trade-off between system-wide advantages and market-specific execution demands strong portfolio management skills. To enhance market essentiality, today's healthcare CEOs need to craft tailored strategies that consider local nuances, unique competitive landscapes, regulatory frameworks, and community needs. More specifically, this includes strategically expanding beyond traditional hospital-centric models to develop comprehensive networks of ambulatory and outpatient facilities, reflecting the industry's transition toward more accessible, consumer-friendly care settings. The mindset of a portfolio manager extends beyond traditional metrics to a deeper understanding of value creation to establish a clear ROI for strategic initiatives, optimize resource allocation, and leverage technologies.

As the overarching framework and ultimate goal that ties everything together, the concept of **systemness** is and will continue to be a focus, representing a shift from fragmented operations toward integrated, coordinated care delivery. This transformation demands more than structural integration — it requires cultural alignment, standardized processes, and consistent patient experiences across all touchpoints. While most healthcare CEOs prioritize systemness, achieving it remains an ongoing journey that demands persistent, clear communication on the "why," effective change leadership initiatives, and strategic resource allocation. In practice, successful healthcare leaders understand that organizational clarity is fundamental to achieving true systemness. They recognize that purposeful goal-setting serves as both a compass for strategic and operational direction and a filter for eliminating activities that do not advance organizational priorities.

Moreover, being open to novel, non-traditional strategic partnerships and having the ability to evaluate and structure them differently is also crucial. Moving forward, healthcare CEOs must refine their skills to lead in a more interconnected and collaborative environment to bridge gaps between different sectors.

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Balancing Cultural Dynamics

High-performing CEOs recognize that culture is their most fundamental responsibility and lasting legacy. As enterprise complexity grows, culture serves as the organizational “personality” that enables or inhibits all other priorities. The challenge of cultural leadership in healthcare manifests in three critical tensions that CEOs must purposefully harmonize.

“As a CEO, my primary responsibility is shaping a healthy organizational culture, ensuring exceptional experience for employees, physicians, providers, and patients. Culture starts with the CEO, and my most significant impact is dedicating myself to our organization’s culture and ensuring that this focus is believed and delivered throughout the entire team to achieve our goals.”

— Christopher D. Howard, President and Chief Executive Officer at Sharp HealthCare

ACCOUNTABILITY AND MISSION.

Healthcare CEOs must foster a culture that integrates data-driven performance with the organization’s “soul” and compassion. Leaders must create an environment where metrics and accountability coexist with the organization’s North Star mission, ensuring that daily actions consistently reflect core values. By communicating and monitoring clear performance expectations, CEOs can ensure the drive for operational excellence enhances, rather than diminishes, the dedication to empathetic and patient-centered care.

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EXCELLENCE AND AGILITY.

Healthcare organizations need to deliver top-tier care and maintain rigorous quality standards while staying nimble enough to effectively adapt to change. They need to develop a culture that simultaneously strives for exceptional performance and disciplined execution, while maintaining the ability to innovate, move quickly, and make timely decisions. Leaders must create psychological safety that allows teams to act with imperfect information, learn from setbacks, and adjust course rapidly. This environment of engagement, accountability, and trust fosters alignment of purpose and strengthens leadership credibility.

SCALE AND IDENTITY.

As healthcare organizations grow, CEOs face the challenge of maintaining distinctive cultural elements across expanding networks. This involves defending cultural “non-negotiables” and preventing cultural dilution to ensure consistent values and behaviors throughout the system. During periods of growth and change, boards are increasingly holding CEOs accountable for doing more than preserving culture – they are held accountable for strengthening and deepening it across the growing enterprise.



The most challenging aspect of cultural leadership lies in its consistent reinforcement, as the true test comes in daily moments. CEOs must model desired behaviors, continuously communicate them, amplify them through their leadership teams, and weave them into decision-making. Culture is not built through occasional initiatives but through the relentless pursuit of consistent, intentional actions that demonstrate and reinforce these balanced priorities.

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Developing Future Leaders

“Building a strong, competent team is the CEO’s most essential skill. It involves cultivating a leadership team of subject matter experts who are comfortable engaging in respectful conflict and asking the tough questions.

— Brian Erling, M.D., President and Chief Executive Officer at Renown Health

To excel in talent development, healthcare CEOs should focus on four critical areas.

The cultural legacy is most powerfully manifested in two interconnected ways: the organizational culture CEOs shape and the leaders they develop to sustain and evolve it. Therefore, a healthcare CEO’s defining achievement lies in leading the leaders — building and developing exceptional teams that embody and advance the organization’s culture. This involves attracting and retaining top talent while fostering an environment of “gentle pushes and soft landings,” where leaders are encouraged to grow while being supported and coached throughout their development journey. The key is striking a thoughtful equilibrium between challenge and overwhelm, inspiring leaders to step beyond their comfort zones without paralyzing them with excessive pressure or unrealistic expectations.

INTENTIONAL TALENT STRATEGIES.

High-performing healthcare organizations have structured, rigorous approaches to attract, develop, and retain future leaders. This involves creating unique value propositions for current and future employees, including innovative learning opportunities and clear career progression paths. By becoming a destination of choice, these organizations offer continuous, deliberate, and targeted development, with timely and honest feedback promptly addressing performance gaps or behavioral issues. By pivoting the narrative from a talent shortage to becoming a talent magnet, healthcare organizations can better navigate the current talent landscape.

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SKILLSET EXPANSION.

As healthcare shifts from hospital-centric to diversified health systems, leaders with diverse perspectives and competencies become essential. CEOs must intentionally expand their teams to include different viewpoints and backgrounds while helping traditional leaders develop new competencies. This includes strategically moving leaders across different functions and care settings, exposing them to a broad range of experiences across sites, divisions, and functions.

Often, this expansion creates tension between established and emerging business models, legacy and novel leadership practices. Successful CEOs actively manage this dynamic, keeping teams unified around shared organizational goals while acknowledging and addressing natural concerns about resource allocation and strategic priorities. Their ability to maintain focus on collective ambition while navigating these tensions becomes critical for organizational cohesion and effective transformation.

STRATEGIC SUCCESSION PLANNING.

CEOs must identify strategically vital roles, both existing and emerging, and systematically develop high-potential talent to maintain leadership continuity and bolster the organization's leadership bench. This involves comprehensive talent assessment, regular performance reviews, and creating growth opportunities before formal role changes.

TEAM EFFECTIVENESS.

Healthcare delivery fundamentally depends on collaboration, making team dynamics critical for success. CEOs must invest time in ensuring their teams have the right structure, composition, meeting routines, decision-making authority, and productive communication and collaboration practices. Successful CEOs synchronize individual excellence with team performance, keeping teams aligned and engaged. Notably, when built on a solid foundation and empowered with clear decision rights, these strong teams can sustain organizational momentum even during leadership transitions and periods of change.

The ultimate measure of leadership development lies in its sustained impact – how well CEOs can build and nurture high-performing teams that consistently deliver excellence while growing and adapting to change. This requires intentionality and an unwavering commitment to talent development.

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In today's interconnected healthcare landscape, a CEO's ability to build and maintain external relationships has evolved into a core strategic imperative. These relationships span the entire ecosystem: healthcare partners, charitable organizations, local businesses, philanthropic allies, and government officials at local, state, and national levels.

External engagement has fundamentally transformed. Advocacy work, once woven into the margins of a CEO's calendar, now demands priority status as one of the "big boulders" that must come first in healthcare leadership. Successful CEOs understand that effective advocacy requires a long-term perspective and sustained investment in relationship building. They know that support cannot



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be summoned in times of need without first cultivating shared interests and mutual trust. This involves the delicate task of navigating partisan topics while maintaining productive relationships across the political spectrum. The complex, ever-shifting regulatory and policy landscape requires CEOs to foster coalition-building and proactively engage with elected officials and policymakers, while simultaneously nurturing relationships with community stakeholders who are equally vital to organizational success.

Brand elevation has emerged as another critical dimension of external relationships. A strong institutional reputation attracts high-caliber talent, enhances community trust, and strengthens negotiating positions. Healthcare CEOs increasingly recognize that their personal visibility and institutional leadership contribute directly to organizational success. As the face of their organizations, CEOs must be thoughtful about how they embody and project their organization's values and mission across both traditional and digital platforms — their personal reputation becomes inextricably linked with the organization's brand. Through their public presence, speaking engagements, and community involvement, CEOs shape perceptions of their organizations and influence external relationships.

The modern healthcare CEO must orchestrate external relationships while ensuring they align with and advance organizational objectives. This requires strategic coordination across multiple dimensions: external advocacy and internal priorities, public visibility and individual relationship building, immediate needs and long-term relationship cultivation. Success increasingly depends on the CEO's ability to maintain these connections while steering the organization toward its mission and sustained impact.

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Essential Tenets of Healthcare CEO Leadership



These days, the role of a healthcare CEO demands a broader and more refined set of leadership principles. Effective leaders demonstrate authenticity and accountability, deriving their influence not from their title or authority, but from their ability to connect genuinely with people at all levels. Healthcare CEOs maintain their approachability and humility, recognizing that their effectiveness is measured by the respect and trust they earn from their team and constituents, as well as the lasting positive impact they create for their organizations and communities.

Our research reveals six essential tenets that distinguish truly impactful leaders. These tenets reflect the evolving demands of the CEO role and provide a framework for understanding what it takes to successfully lead a healthcare organization into the future.

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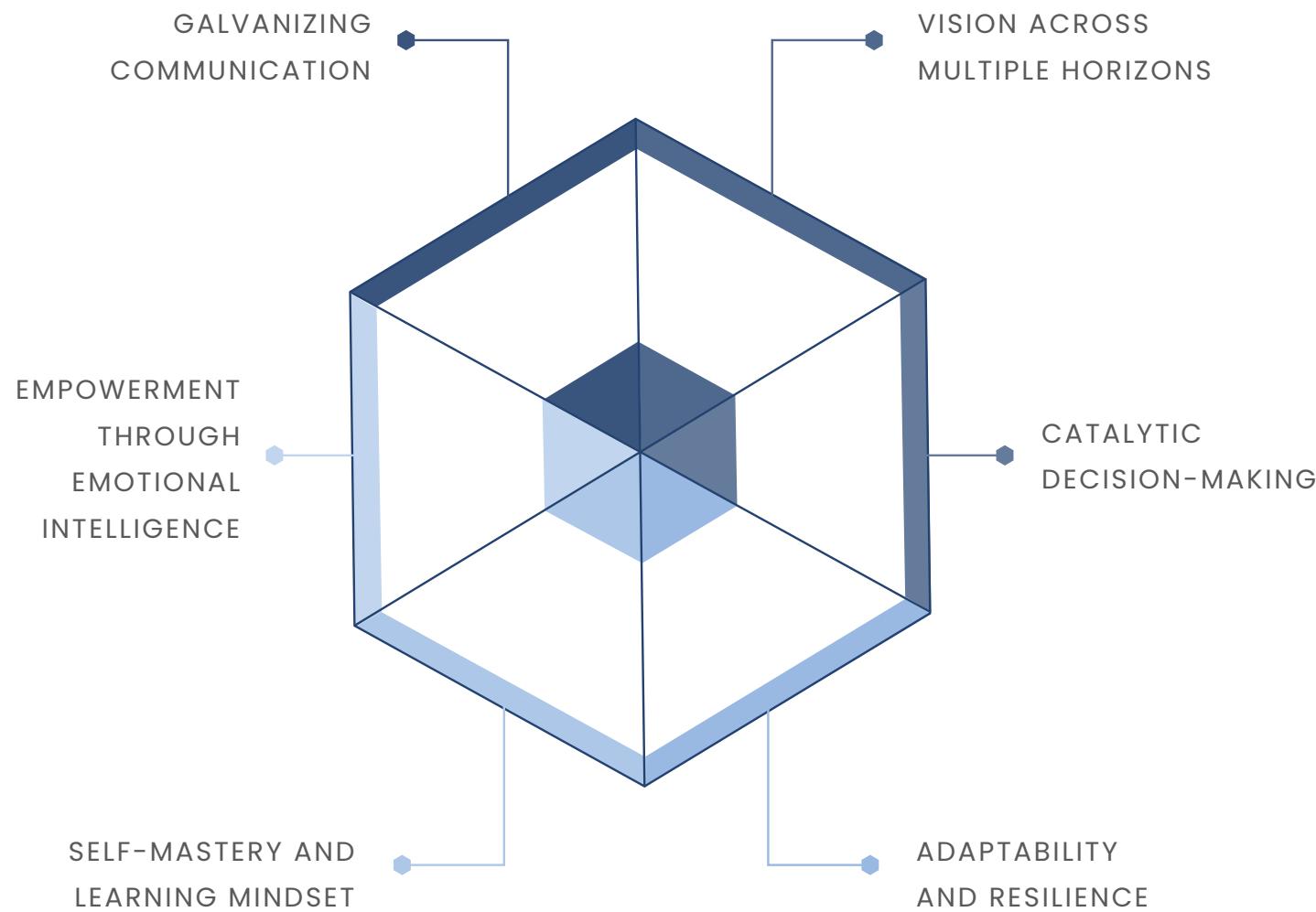
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Six Essential Tenets of Impactful Leadership



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Vision across Multiple Horizons

Modern healthcare CEOs must possess a unique dual perspective, able to zoom in and out almost instantly, seeing both distant horizons and immediate realities. This wide-angle lens enables them to anticipate industry shifts, while their close-up focus keeps them acutely attuned to present challenges. In fact, “seeing near” means “hearing near” — being in touch with the immediate needs and concerns of their teams and organization.

In today's complex healthcare leadership, a CEO must balance three roles: envisioning the future 10-12 years ahead, managing current performance, and understanding how it ties into the organization's past. While many CEOs focus on immediate results, the long-term vision and historical context are often overlooked but essential for sustained success.

— Kenneth Holmen, M.D., President and Chief Executive Officer at CentraCare

These leaders excel at translating complex visions into actionable strategies that resonate throughout their organizations. They consistently, rather than intermittently, provide clarity about the “why” while engaging others in defining the “how” — i.e., the implementation plan — by setting clear priorities and ensuring disciplined execution. The ability to pivot between long-term strategic thinking and immediate operational needs allows them to keep their organizations both ambitious in vision and grounded in practical reality.

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Catalytic Decision-Making

“Urgency means moving with pace and speed, even without perfect data. We must be willing to act quickly, learn fast, and be comfortable with occasional missteps. When you, as a CEO, take the mystery out of mistake-making and create psychological safety, your team will take appropriate risks, improvise, and move swiftly. Fail quickly, fix quickly, and move on.

— Tom Gessel, President and Chief Executive Officer at Asante

In today's accelerating environment, strategic decisions rarely present themselves as clear choices, requiring CEOs to trust their judgment and vision rather than rely solely on data. Successful healthcare CEOs have mastered the art of blending imperfect or incomplete data with their understanding of broader industry trends and future scenarios. This helps them make smart decisions without getting stuck waiting for every last detail and falling into “analysis paralysis.” They know that holding back for complete certainty can mean missing out on critical opportunities and that the cost of inaction can outweigh the risks of imperfect action. Moreover, they are prepared to navigate strategic options that may be unpopular and politically charged, demonstrating the courage to say “no” when necessary and the boldness to explore novel, unconventional ideas that challenge the status quo.

The most effective leaders catalyze positive change by cultivating environments where calculated risk-taking is encouraged. By creating an environment where people feel confident to share their views openly, and maintaining transparency about both successes and setbacks, they empower their organizations to take measured risks and make quick decisions.

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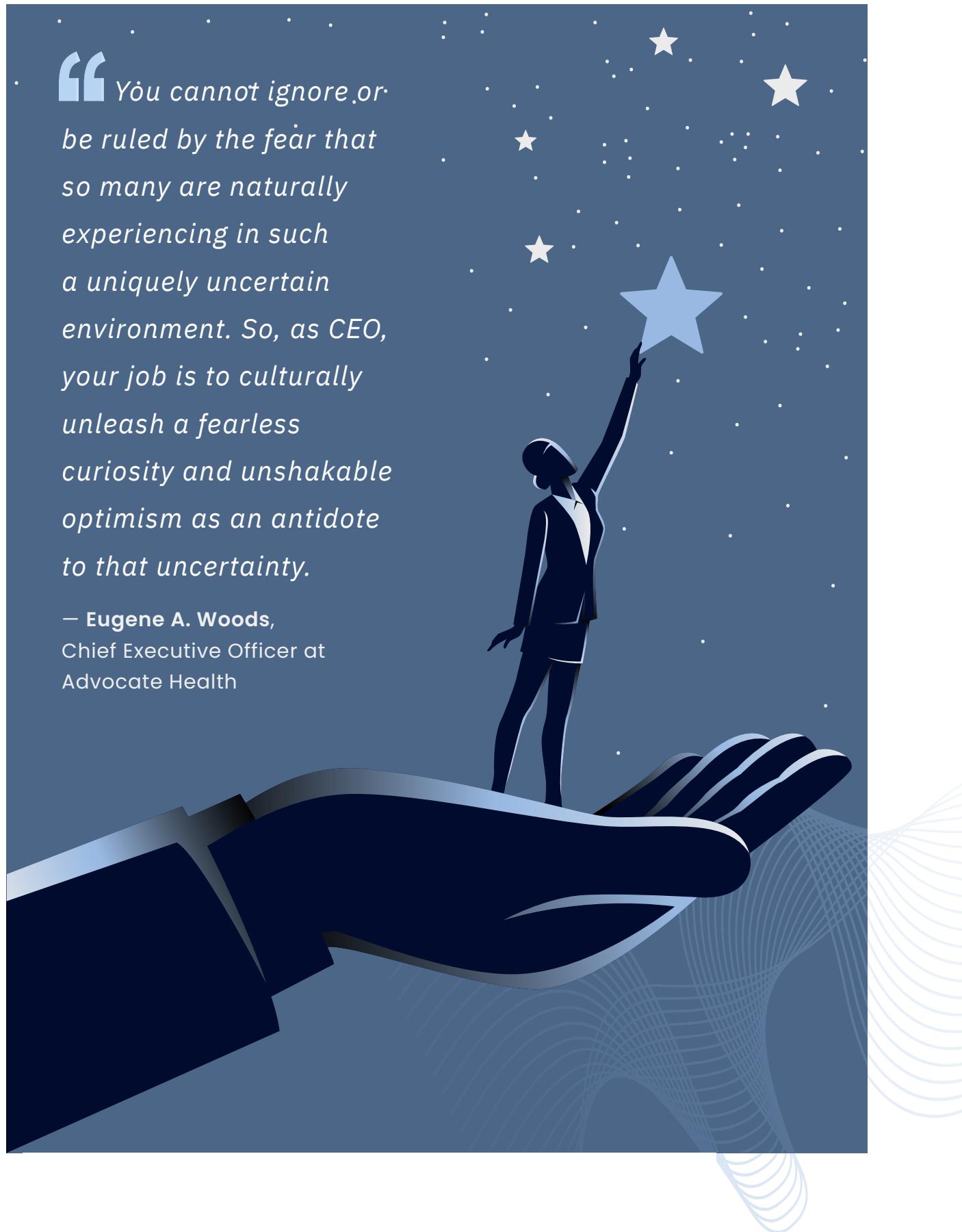
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Adaptability and Resilience

Far beyond mere buzzwords, adaptability and resilience are indispensable qualities for modern healthcare CEOs. These leaders must be able to flex on the needs of the moment and swiftly adapt their strategies and tactics while maintaining organizational stability. Additionally, the pace of change demands leaders with a bias toward urgency, those who embrace speed with confidence and find urgency exhilarating rather than debilitating.

“As CEO, I coined the term ‘purposeful urgency’ – when our team mastered the 10-minute mile, I challenged them to run nine. Leading ongoing change management means not just acknowledging the need to transform, but building an agile organization that embraces new approaches and partnerships.

— **Laura S. Kaiser**, President and Chief Executive Officer of SSM Health

Resilience enables bouncing back from setbacks, and the most impactful leaders understand the importance of finding ways to renew, reflect, and re-energize. They recognize that without these practices, they risk losing the stamina required for their roles. Paired with optimism, resilience becomes a formidable force. A CEO’s optimism is a key to effective leadership, as leaders with optimism inspire their teams to view obstacles as opportunities and nurture a solutions-focused mindset.

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Self-Mastery and Learning Mindset

Healthcare CEOs understand that leading others begins with leading oneself. This commitment to personal growth requires regular introspection, purposeful skill development, and coaching. The courage to step outside of one's comfort zone is essential: the internal work of leadership starts with recognizing the natural tendency to stick to familiar tasks and instead choosing to engage with areas that require development. It also includes managing personal energy and consistently bringing one's best self to the role.

“As a CEO, the feedback you get is not always as frequent or detailed as it might be in other roles. That is why it is so important to be introspective and humble, taking the time to reflect on whether you handled situations correctly, made the right decisions, and what you might do differently next time.

— John Antes, President and Chief Executive Officer at Southern Illinois Healthcare

Successful leaders actively seek learning opportunities and insights from both successes and stumbles, as well as from observations of others. The most effective healthcare CEOs approach their personal development with the same strategic mindset they apply to organizational challenges. This commitment to continuous learning enables them to stay current with industry trends while maintaining the personal resilience and growth necessary for long-term success.

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Empowerment through Emotional Intelligence

“As a CEO, you need to be a good judge of your environment. Reading the room and timing your words are crucial. If people are distracted, your message may not be heard. Effective leadership requires knowing when to speak and when to listen, ensuring your voice makes an impact at the right moment.

— **Darlene Stromstad**, President and Chief Executive Officer at the Mohawk Valley Health System

In an industry as human-powered as healthcare, effective leadership requires humility, collaboration, and the ability to leverage the team's strengths. A CEO does not need to be the smartest person in the room on all issues. In fact, embracing the wisdom and expertise of others enriches perspective and strengthens leadership decisions. This mindset fosters a culture of mutual respect and shared purpose, where everyone feels valued and heard.

Active listening skills are at the heart of emotional intelligence. Being a thoughtful, rational, and empathetic listener allows CEOs to understand not just what people are saying but also what they might **not** be saying. It enables them to get to the root of issues, ask the right questions, and create an environment of support.

Modern CEOs understand that showing vulnerability is not a sign of weakness. This authenticity creates an environment of trust and openness that enables their teams to speak up honestly and take calculated risks.

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Galvanizing Communication

Effective communication is not just about sharing information – it is about connecting at a human level and communicating persuasively to inspire action and alignment. Successful CEOs are able to form meaningful connections with different audiences, from the leadership team and physicians to the broader organization, patients, and external partners. They tailor their messages to resonate with each group's unique needs and expectations. This takes agility and finesse, ensuring the right message reaches the right audience at the right time. The three essential elements of CEO communication – credibility as a messenger, clarity of message, and effectiveness of delivery – work together to break down barriers and galvanize the organization toward shared goals.

Consistency is another bedrock of impactful leadership. Maintaining a steady course on core values, priorities, and messages is vital for any CEO. It plays out in two important ways: consistency of message by ensuring a unified message across all communications, and consistency of cadence by maintaining a regular rhythm of engagement with the organization. Teams perform best when they know the organization's priorities and when they embrace the "why" behind necessary changes. This consistency provides a clear framework for decision-making, even in the absence of specific directions or guidelines. When team members understand the CEO's expectations, they can act with confidence, knowing that their actions align with the organization's goals.

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Galvanizing Communication

“*Cascading communication does not work – we are still too hierarchical and need effective networks of information, engagement, and empowerment. My dream is to have 120,000 team members improve the care experience without waiting to be asked or having to be told. Every morning when they wake up.*

— Michael A. Slubowski,
President and Chief Executive
Officer at Trinity Health



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Holistic Leadership: Mastering the 360-Degree Impact



At its core, effective healthcare leadership requires the ability to maintain extreme clarity while avoiding the traps of overly close operational oversight and micromanagement.

The most successful healthcare CEOs demonstrate a remarkable ability to steady their organizations through daily turbulence. While organizations naturally tend to zigzag based on pressing issues, effective leaders serve as organizational anchors, focusing on strategic imperatives while acknowledging and addressing immediate tasks. This steady presence becomes particularly important as healthcare organizations navigate transformation, financial pressures, and workforce challenges.

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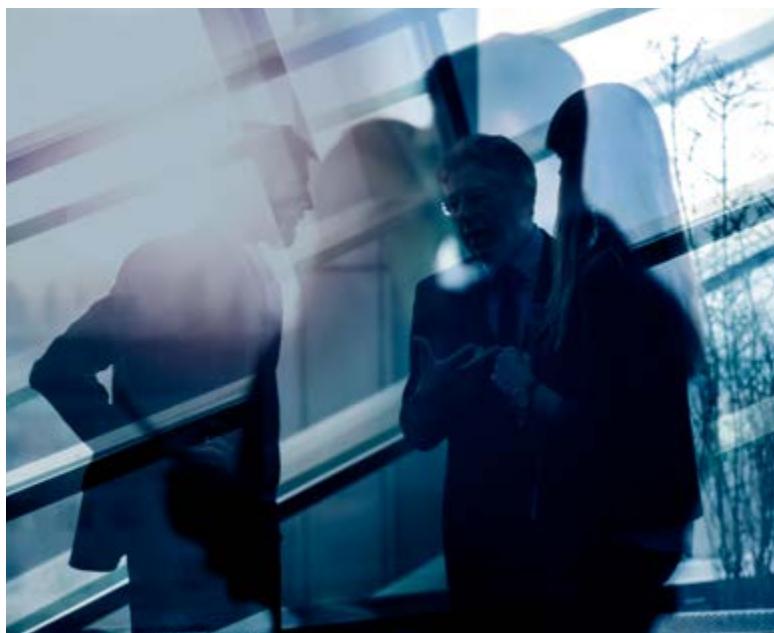
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Our research shows a compelling picture of leadership as a multi-dimensional force that simultaneously shapes board dynamics, leadership team effectiveness, organizational stability, and community ecosystem, following a holistic, 360-degree leadership philosophy. Each dimension requires distinct competencies and styles, yet all must work in concert to create sustained organizational success through strategic clarity and authentic engagement at all levels.

“ As CEOs, we must ensure that our drive for the next big thing does not overwhelm those who are already busy taking care of patients. It is a balancing act of pushing forward while making sure that what is already accomplished is appreciated and that what we have decided upon is implemented and realized.

— John Fernandez, President and Chief Executive Officer at Brown University Health



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Board Dynamics: Navigating Governance

The relationship between healthcare CEOs and their boards is a complex dynamic and a delicate dance that demands thoughtful interpersonal navigation and mutual trust. Our research delves into the factors that define productive board relationships and how to manage them successfully.

“ When working with the board, your skill as a CEO of engaging in ‘crucial conversations’ – when the stakes are high – is called upon. We need to invest in the future talent of healthcare leadership by teaching them how to work with the board.

— James F. Dover, President and Chief Executive Officer at Avera Health

The board-CEO partnership evolves through distinct phases over time. The initial “honeymoon period” is typically marked by a great deal of flexibility, followed by periods of strategic decision-making and sometimes confrontation that test and shape the relationship. As CEOs gain experience, the relationship often matures into a more nuanced partnership based on mutual understanding and respect. The most effective partnerships achieve the highest level of synchronization, marked by a deep level of trust and confidence on both sides.

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Board Dynamics: Navigating Governance

Successful CEOs emphasize several critical elements in managing board relationships.

GETTING TO KNOW THE BOARD.

CEOs spend time to first familiarize themselves with each board member to understand board dynamics and assess the board's collective personality. They then can better understand how the board aligns with the organization's needs and create strategies and tactics to optimize the partnership.

PRIORITIZING THE CHAIR RELATIONSHIP.

The bond between the CEO and the board chair is of utmost importance. Effective CEOs keep the lines of communication open and honest, with regular check-ins to align expectations, tackle concerns, and build a solid working relationship.

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH ENGAGEMENT.

Regular interactions, including board meetings, strategic planning sessions, and informal discussions, foster a sense of partnership. Effective CEOs ensure they communicate clearly, present an accurate picture of the organization's reality, and set well-defined priorities with measurable outcomes.

TAPPING INTO BOARD EXPERTISE.

Strategic CEOs view their boards as a treasure trove of strategic insights. They leverage board members as "the single best set of consultants" dedicated to helping the CEO succeed.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE CAPABILITIES.

Healthcare CEOs actively partner with their boards to enhance governance effectiveness through ongoing education about industry complexities and emerging challenges. They provide input into the board nomination process, helping identify candidates whose skills and backgrounds align with the organization's evolving needs.

As healthcare organizations continue to evolve, the relationship between CEOs and their boards will require increasingly deliberate approaches to governance and leadership.

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Teams at the Top: Building Executive Excellence

“ *We do not fail because we have conflicts. We fail because we do not manage the conflicts.*

— Joon S. Lee, M.D., Chief Executive Officer at Emory Healthcare

Successful CEOs invest significant time in developing their leadership teams, carefully planning team composition, roles, and leadership profiles to maximize team potential. They prioritize hiring executives who are team-oriented and define success by the collective, rather than those solely driven by personal career advancement. Other selection criteria include relevant expertise, competence, adaptability, organizational commitment, and alignment with the organization's mission, ensuring a strong cultural addition.

Perhaps most critically, effective CEOs remain vigilant against complacency by creating an environment where healthy tension and debate coexist with mutual respect. This “truth over harmony” perspective has shifted team cultures away from conflict avoidance toward ones where transparent discussion of different viewpoints is encouraged and valued. While assumptions are challenged and boundaries are pushed, CEOs choose to play the role of a moderator.

Equally important is individual development. CEOs invest deeply in performance reviews and the long-term professional growth of each direct report. They focus on positioning team members for success over extended time horizons, recognizing that sustainable organizational achievement requires targeted investment in leadership capabilities.

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Teams at the Top: Building Executive Excellence

“ Looking at my C-Suite team today, the secret to our alignment is: brilliant, intellectually smart people who are universally driven to succeed, and most importantly, who all believe in what we are trying to accomplish.

— Mark O'Halla, President and Chief Executive Officer at Prisma Health



“ Leadership is about understanding your team's 'bell curve': those who are easily convinced, those who doubt until proven otherwise, and those who support you until proven otherwise. Simple actions, such as being focused and empathetic, can help you effectively lead your team.

— Alan S. Kaplan, M.D., Chief Executive Officer at UW Health

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Presence in Action: Leading Across the Organization

Successful CEOs have moved beyond the traditional “ivory tower” approach to embrace a more visible, accessible leadership style that resonates throughout their organizations.

“ *There is no substitute for CEO visibility at the beginning of any new initiative.*

— David Strong, President and Chief Executive Officer at Orlando Health

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP PRESENCE.
The most effective healthcare leaders maintain a consistent presence across their organizations, understanding that visibility is not just about being seen — it is about meaningful engagement. This includes structured communications through monthly video forums, employee orientations, and leadership summits.

However, leadership presence extends beyond formal meetings and presentations. CEOs carefully consider how their daily routines — from their chosen paths through facilities to where they take lunch — can create opportunities for daily rounds and spontaneous conversations. These touchpoints serve as vital “temperature checks” that keep leaders connected to organizational realities and prevent isolation from frontline challenges.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE LEADERSHIP.

CEO engagement becomes particularly crucial during periods of organizational change or new strategic initiatives. Visibility during these critical phases serves multiple purposes: it reinforces the initiative’s importance, demonstrates personal commitment, provides clarity about organizational direction, and ensures alignment across different constituent groups.

MEDICAL STAFF PARTNERSHIP.

A particularly important aspect of organizational leadership involves building and maintaining productive relationships with clinical staff across hospital and ambulatory settings. While CEOs cannot personally manage all physician relationships, they play a vital role in setting the tone for these interactions and establishing frameworks for meaningful engagement.

The most impactful healthcare leaders understand that leadership presence, when authentic and consistent, serves as a powerful tool for driving organizational alignment and cultural transformation.

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Ecosystem Architecture: Shaping Community Impact

Healthcare CEOs are increasingly prioritizing community impact, redefining their mission from the absence of illness in the neighborhood to overall community wellbeing. This development, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, aligns with the values and expectations of the next-generation workforce. As major economic drivers in their communities, healthcare organizations bear a significant responsibility to enhance the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

COMMUNITY WELLNESS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT.

More and more CEOs aim to create “communities of wellness,” going beyond healthcare provision to include job creation, education enhancement, transportation improvement, and housing solutions.

ECOSYSTEM ARCHITECTS.

In this new setup, healthcare CEOs often act as ecosystem catalysts, understanding and nurturing the complex interdependencies within local communities. This involves building coalitions and collaborating with stakeholders such as local administrations, schools, business partners, and other organizations to develop holistic solutions.

WORKFORCE EXPECTATIONS AND SOCIAL VALUE.

The evolving workforce, led by Generation Z and millennials, seeks purpose and impact in their work and wants to align with organizations that stand for meaningful causes and engage in social issues. Healthcare CEOs must be attuned to these expectations and leverage their organizations' active role in creating “communities of wellness” and driving broader societal impact to gain a competitive advantage in attracting and recruiting top talent.

By implementing this community-focused strategy, healthcare CEOs can drive meaningful change and create lasting impact for all members of the community.

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Preparing for Tomorrow: Future-Proof Healthcare Leadership



The healthcare landscape of tomorrow demands a “better,” more proficient breed of leader — one who can navigate increasing complexity while maintaining organizational stability and driving innovation. While fundamental leadership attributes — drive, focus, and the ability to execute — remain essential, tomorrow’s healthcare CEOs must master these skills with greater depth. The evolution from traditional leadership through persuasion and purpose must now incorporate a “scientific engineering” mindset. Future CEOs will need a deeper understanding of healthcare delivery mechanics and technology applications, combining clinical knowledge with technical acumen alongside fundamental management skills.

Success will increasingly depend on leaders’ ability to ask questions we do not know to ask today — anticipating challenges before they emerge and imagining solutions for problems still taking shape.

REIMAGINING HEALTHCARE LEADERSHIP

HEALTHCARE VISIONARIES: OUR CEO CONTRIBUTORS

THE CEO AGENDA

- Ensuring Strategic Agility
- Managing Scale, Portfolio, and Systemness
- Balancing Cultural Dynamics
- Developing Future Leaders
- Driving External Engagement

ESSENTIAL TENETS OF HEALTHCARE CEO LEADERSHIP

- Vision across Multiple Horizons
- Catalytic Decision-Making
- Adaptability and Resilience
- Self-Mastery and Learning Mindset
- Empowerment through Emotional Intelligence
- Galvanizing Communication

HOLISTIC LEADERSHIP: MASTERING THE 360-DEGREE IMPACT

- Board Dynamics: Navigating Governance
- Teams at the Top: Building Executive Excellence
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PREPARING FOR TOMORROW: FUTURE-PROOF HEALTHCARE LEADERSHIP

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Tomorrow's healthcare landscape will be shaped by several market and talent trends, all of which are expected to accelerate and intensify in the coming years. The leadership principles detailed in this report provide a robust framework and practical roadmap for addressing these trends effectively. By embracing and mastering these leadership principles, healthcare CEOs will be more adept at leading through the following emerging demands:

WORKFORCE EVOLUTION AND ENGAGEMENT.

Tomorrow's healthcare leaders must excel at engaging an increasingly multi-faceted, multi-generational workforce. This includes creating meaningful opportunities across generations, building trust-based cultures, and fundamentally redesigning workforce models. The focus will shift from traditional hierarchical structures to networks of information and communication that empower all levels of the organization, requiring new approaches to talent development and engagement.

INNOVATION AND RISK MANAGEMENT.

The healthcare CEO of tomorrow must foster environments where calculated risk-taking is promoted and innovation can flourish. While today's healthcare CEOs are not trained or encouraged to be great innovators, this paradigm is shifting dramatically. Innovation inherently means embracing risk — a significant departure from the industry's traditionally risk-averse culture. Leaders must create environments that support experimentation while maintaining high standards for quality and safety, balancing the industry's emphasis on stability with the imperative for change.

“The greatest excitement and joy for me as a CEO comes from exercising the power of the pen. Yet, this incredible privilege keeps me awake at night as I seek to use that power in the most responsible and impactful ways.

— Dennis W. Pullin, President and Chief Executive Officer at Virtua Health

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION.

CEOs should not be distracted by every hyped technology trend; they must develop sufficient technological literacy to make strategic decisions about digital transformation. This includes understanding how to leverage artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies strategically while maintaining focus on core organizational objectives. The emphasis will be on practical application rather than theoretical knowledge.

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY CARE.

Future healthcare leaders must excel at building and managing complex partnerships across traditionally siloed sectors. Success will depend on maintaining unmatched levels of flexible thinking and forging unconventional alliances, including strategic partnerships with former competitors and collaborations with non-traditional players outside healthcare. Leaders must orchestrate collaboration across private, public, and philanthropic sectors to address community-wide health challenges, demonstrating adaptability in the face of changing industry dynamics.

POLICY LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY.

Future healthcare CEOs must engage more actively in shaping healthcare policy at both local and national levels. This involves building strong advocacy capabilities and contributing meaningfully to policy discussions that affect healthcare delivery and access. Leaders must balance day-to-day operational priorities while maintaining a clear voice on policy matters that impact their communities' health needs and their organizations' ability to serve effectively.

Looking toward 2030 and beyond, the healthcare CEO will evolve even further from today as a strategic collaborator, convener, and partner while driving organizational performance and vision. Success will require being both architect and builder — designing new models of workforce and care delivery while constructing the partnerships and capabilities needed to bring them to life. This deliberate balance of preserving what works while also boldly innovating where change is needed will define leadership excellence in an environment where the pace of change continues to accelerate.

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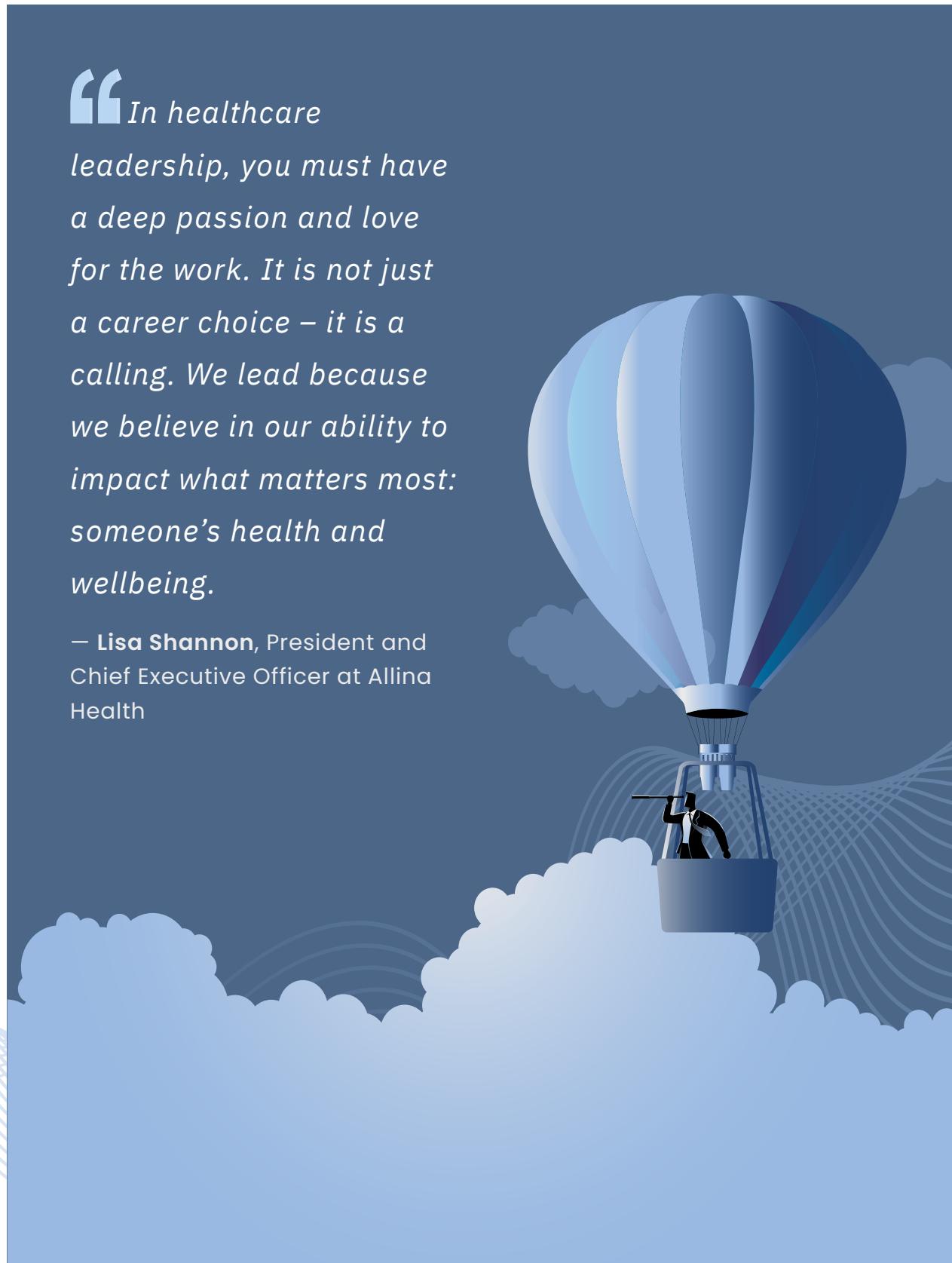
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“In healthcare leadership, you must have a deep passion and love for the work. It is not just a career choice – it is a calling. We lead because we believe in our ability to impact what matters most: someone’s health and wellbeing.

— **Lisa Shannon**, President and Chief Executive Officer at Allina Health

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Healthcare CEOs today must master new leadership paradigms that emphasize agile leadership and cultural enablement as well as team effectiveness and collective leadership. Our research shows successful leaders are moving from traditional hierarchical structures toward networks of information and engagement, while building organizations that embrace calculated risk-taking and quick decision-making. These leaders excel at maintaining strategic focus during daily challenges, fostering environments where teams are empowered to act, and creating cultures that accelerate innovation through authentic engagement and collaboration. Effective healthcare CEOs also recognize that a strong partnership with their boards is fundamental to organizational success. They take a deliberate approach to building mutual trust through regular engagement, transparent communication, and alignment with board members, viewing them as strategic allies in advancing the organization's mission.

The next generation of healthcare leadership will require a sophisticated integration of clinical expertise, technological understanding, and management acumen. Tomorrow's CEOs must excel at engaging multi-generational workforces, driving practical digital transformation, and orchestrating partnerships across sectors. Success will be measured not just by organizational performance, but by their ability to architect comprehensive healthcare

ecosystems that enhance community wellness while maintaining innovation momentum. The future belongs to those leaders who can combine strategic vision with operational excellence, always keeping healthcare's fundamental mission at the forefront: improving the health and wellbeing of the communities they serve.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the visionary healthcare leaders who contributed their insights to this research, including Eugene A. Woods, David Strong, Darlene Stromstad, Michael A. Slubowski, Lisa Shannon, Dennis W. Pullin, Mark O'Halla, Dennis M. Murphy, Joon S. Lee, M.D., Omar B. Lateef, D.O., Alan S. Kaplan, M.D., Laura S. Kaiser, Nathan Howell, Christopher D. Howard, Kenneth Holmen, M.D., Tom Gessel, John Fernandez, Brian Erling, M.D., James F. Dover, and John Antes. Their candid perspectives and real-world experiences have helped illuminate the path forward for healthcare leadership.

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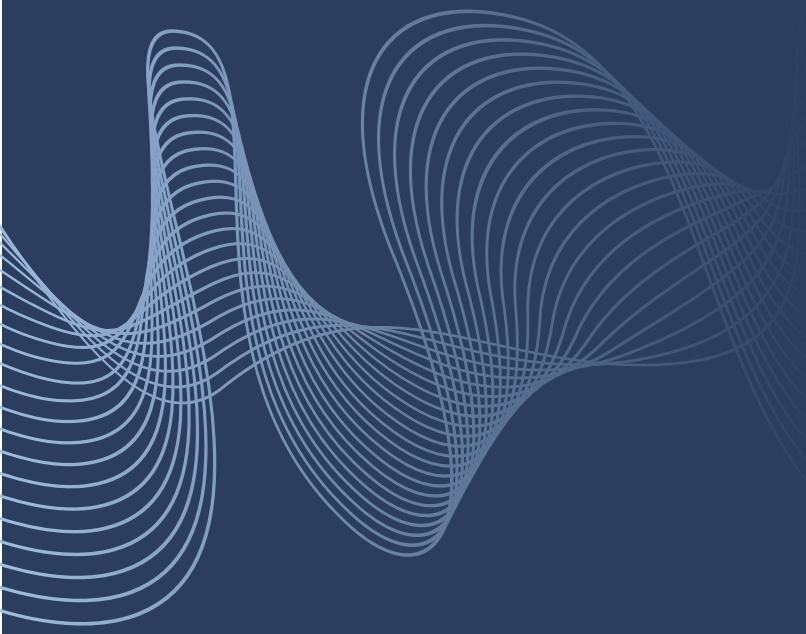
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With nearly 2,800 successful healthcare CEO placements across our 56-year history — averaging one CEO placement every week — WittKieffer brings unparalleled experience in healthcare leadership recruitment and development. Our deep industry expertise, combined with our proven ability to identify and place transformational leaders, makes us the partner of choice for boards seeking their next CEO. We understand that impactful leadership is the cornerstone of healthcare excellence, and we remain committed to connecting visionary leaders with organizations that share our mission.

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