

Consultant's Corner

Chief Diversity Officers: Ensuring Diversity in Health Care

Diversity as a business concept has steadily gained credence in America's corporate world. But what about our health care organizations? While access to care may be less of an issue today, arriving at an effective cultural competency model may still be a challenge for many. Who is looking after the diversity initiatives in hospitals? Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs).

When properly empowered, CDOs can be effective with positive ripple effects throughout the organization and community. They help steer the organization in the right direction. Fred Hobby, Greenville (SC) Hospital System's CDO, refers to them as the "conscience of the organization."

But despite the great intentions of health care leaders, signs and vestiges of the old status quo still exist. Last year, the American College of Healthcare Executives released a well-publicized study on career attainment of health care executives by race/ethnicity, updating their 1994 study, and showed that minorities still lag behind in several areas, including senior level job attainment and salaries.

In today's multi-cultural and linguistic society, diversity goes beyond race and gender. Therefore, when making the decision to hire or elevate a Diversity Officer, keep in mind key characteristics that have been

beneficial to a number of practitioners:

Deep Understanding of Laws and Regulations: Beyond EEOC and Affirmative Action are legal and regulatory loops that can snare an organization. The CDO needs to be aware of and keep up to date with agencies such as the Office of Civil Rights and its oversight of such issues as language services relating to culturally competent care. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other similar laws, regulations and standards also warrant constant vigilance.

Independent and a Politically Savvy Team Player: Regardless of the CDOs place in the organization's structure, such an individual must have a sense of independence, establish programs and solicit ongoing support. Elita Christianson, assistant vice president for Inova Health System's Community Health and Cultural Competence Division in Fairfax, VA said that the CDO must also be sensitive to many types of issues and the people raise them. She said a thick skin and a good measure of patience is another helpful asset. The CDO also needs to be part of the team working on recruitment and retention issues, and delicately, but appropriately, bring up retention practices that may be driving away minority employees. This could yield results that lower turnover and alleviate the recruitment and retention crisis.



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Vested in the Organization's Business:

The CDO has to be knowledgeable and adept at explaining the organization's mission and how diversity contributes to it. Wayne Boatwright, CDO for St. Mary's Medical Center in Grand Rapids, MI, said it is no longer adequate to support diversity simply because it is the right thing to do. Rather, he and others point to the business imperative for diversity and the positive impact on the bottom line. The CDO should make the case proactively, with current,

measurable outcomes, and be an active member of the organization's Strategic Planning Committee. That's why we favor former COOs or vice presidents of operations as CDO candidates.

Energetic Public Speaker: The public includes hospital employees, patients and families, and community groups, as well as senior management. The CDO has to be agile and on top of the issues while representing the organization in formal meetings, employee training events, interactive community sessions and formal external presentations.

Research and Writing Abilities: With shifting demographics, research skills to mine the latest relevant issues and statistics will put both the CDO and the hospital in the best light. Local, regional and national business and general population trends and their impact on current or projected service offerings are great starting points. CDOs also need to be adept at writing effectively and presenting.

Self Assured: The CDO needs to be poised and have the ability to project intelligence. CDOs should be able to confidently stand side by side and discuss issues with the rest of the senior management team and external contacts, such as representatives from regulatory bodies. A self-assured CDO is more likely to have the composure to raise key diversity issues.

Internal and External

Networking Guru: The internal grapevine can yield a wealth of information. A well-connected CDO usually can become aware of the next internal trouble spot,

and appropriately address it before it becomes an agenda item in a senior executive meeting. External networking skills also should be strong, for self-advancement as well as to stay current on new developments from peers, regulatory agencies and other associated professionals. CDOs are uniquely positioned to assist boards and search committees in evaluating and selecting search firms, leading to a more diverse candidate slate for senior level positions.

Tenacity: Each day will be different with some encounters repeated, often with varying players. Whether applying negotiating skills with employees or trying to resolve conflict for families, the business of trying to understand and value the different, morphing cultures, in an attempt to provide competent care, is ongoing - diversity is a work in progress not just something to be celebrated.

Yearning and Passion for Change: CDOs are passionate and excited about their position and incremental accomplishments - one diversity officer energetically recited the week's list of diversity related activities. Dionne Adams, Lee Memorial in Ft. Myers, FL, Diversity Manager, noted that this passion must be tempered with objectivity but always tied to the hospital's broad mission. Passion is a good source of renewal and they can use that passion to embrace the challenges and help affect policies that promote a culturally and linguistically pleasing environment for patients and employees. —

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