



Physician Leadership

Doctors as Leaders

BY TY STOCKTON
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Physicians might be the most highly trained people in the professional world. Some take that training several steps further with specialization. They learn how to remove tumors, transplant organs, diagnose a rare malady and save countless lives. Very little, if any, of that training involves running a hospital, managing a budget or leading a team of fellow physicians.

Yet many large hospitals such as the Mayo Clinic and the Cleveland Clinic are now headed by physicians with a Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree, rather than by business leaders with a Master of Business Administration (MBA). These hospitals may be better prepared to solve challenges within the medical fields, but are they as successful overall as the hospitals led by non-physicians holding business management degrees?

Wyoming Medical Center in Casper sees the benefit of placing physicians in positions of leadership – enough to create a shared governance model and institute a Joint Operations Board comprised half of physicians and half of administrators.

“The idea is to help both the hospitals and the physicians work together,” said Dr. Robert Neff, the chairman of the Joint Operations Board at Wyoming Medical Center. “The most successful hospitals are the ones where the physicians are engaged with the management. If it were just administrative, we might miss important considerations on the clinical side. On the other hand, the physicians will put the patient first, but there might be regulations or business issues the physicians might not be aware of. The Joint Operations Board makes us very collaborative. We can cover issues affecting both the physicians and the administration.”

Cheyenne Regional Medical Center also recognizes the importance of giving physicians training for leadership skills.

“We just finished a 16-month series of four-hour seminars on talent development with Advisory Board,” said Dr. Jeffrey Chapman, CRMC’s Chief Medical Officer.

Advisory Board is a research-based organization that focuses on the medical industry. “We provide provider organizations



Robert Neff, MD

with training support for physicians as well as non-physicians,” said Pete Merrylees, the Practice Manager for Talent Development at Advisory Board. “The starting point is that there is a common situation where physician leaders find themselves in leadership positions, but their training hasn’t been in leadership or management. They’re asking, ‘How do I direct change?’ But they don’t necessarily have the tool kit for that role as a leader.”

The talent development seminars CRMC participates in are one of many methods Advisory Board and other training companies use to give these highly-trained professionals the information they need to succeed in leadership roles. There are as many methods as there are hospitals seeking leadership training for their physicians. Wyoming Medical Center, for instance, also employs management training for its physician leaders.

“Since the Joint Operations Board’s creation, we’ve been given lots of opportunities for leadership training,” Dr. Neff said. The physicians who participated attended seminars, read books chosen specifically to improve their leadership skills, and were even tested on their progress. Much of the leadership training at Wyoming Medical Center was administered by the American Hospital Association’s Physician Leadership Forum.

“Our Joint Operation Board’s chair and co-chair went to the Governance Institute in September,” Dr. Neff said, explaining that his hospital is excited to help train its physicians to become better leaders.

The leadership instruction may differ somewhat from one hospital to the next, but at hospitals where physician leadership is

promoted, the outcomes are similar.

"It's a lot of work, but it's rewarding," Dr. Neff said. "We get to meet with the hospital board of directors and give the physicians' point of view." He said the Joint Operations Board has helped implement ideas to improve patient care – from things as small as making the spaces in the parking lot bigger to acquiring software that puts important medical resources right at the doctors' fingertips.

"And it's encouraging to know we're being heard," Dr. Neff said. He explained that there was a policy in practice that the physicians thought didn't make sense, and physician input swayed the board of directors to change the policy.

"The physician's voice is heard, and it improves the work experience," Dr. Neff said.

Back in the capital city, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center is observing many of the same benefits to leadership training.


"We absolutely see a spark with the people who participate," Dr. Chapman said. "One of the things I've been thinking about or working on is ownership. Everyone in the hospital has ownership of their work. If you have a rental car and it's dirty and the service due light comes on, you just take it back to the rental

agency. If it's your car, you wash it and take care of the service. Involving physicians in decision-making, which we're trying to do now (physicians sit with executive team), gives them ownership and gets them excited about their work and the work of the hospital again."

Dr. Chapman also said his experiences with former military personnel is an awareness of the second- and third-level consequences to actions. He tries to explain to physicians he works with the importance of these indirect results of decisions, both for patient care as well as for leadership of teams and departments.

"You tend to focus on the direct impacts," he said, "but you don't think about second and third level. Now I step back and think about who else is affected by the decisions I make."

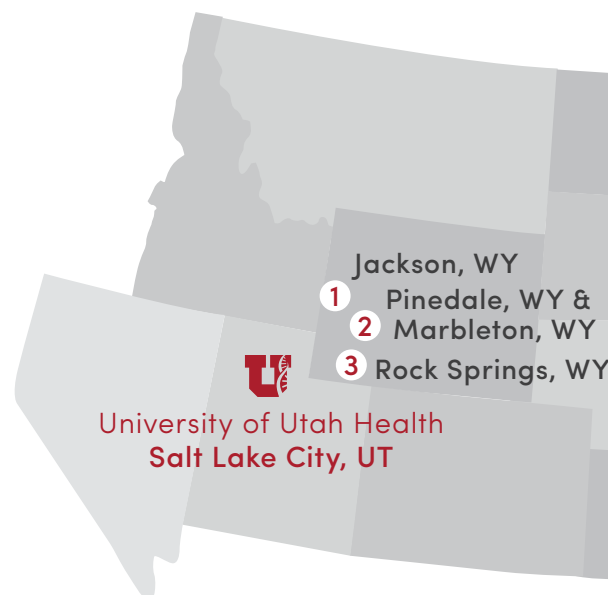
With his awareness of those cascading results, Dr. Chapman sees them in leadership development, as well.

"We see other benefits, as well," he said. "We're working on the patient experience steering committee now, and we are already seeing improvements in patient care, and I think that comes from talent development. Getting people trained to become future leaders truly improves the workplace and the patient care." 

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