

The Leadership Forum



Russell S. Phillips

Words of Wisdom

Advising faculty who are considering seeking positions as Division Chief

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For many faculty members, the next step in career progression is becoming division chief. However, the role often seems mysterious. I remember many years where I had little appreciation for the work that chiefs do, or a sense of whether I was prepared to take on the role. Recently, I was asked to testify for a search committee about what they might look for in a new chief, and I thought my reflections might be of interest to those who are considering taking on this new role. The following is a summary of my comments:

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"New chiefs will be asked to lead general medicine divisions at a time of great challenge and opportunity. Beside the academic missions of education and research, the high costs of care and resulting new payment systems are requiring organizations to rethink financial and clinical operations. As organizations opt for risk and shared savings through Accountable Care Organizations, the focus will be on reducing inpatient bed use, transitioning care to lower cost settings, and building infrastructure for care management. Rather than seeking to drive procedure and inpatient volume, forward-thinking CEOs,

CFOs and department chairs will be looking to increase the number of patient lives cared for, while reducing cost and enhancing quality.

Chiefs will need to advocate for resources for general medicine as their divisions provide the bulk of inpatient care, teaching, primary care and their researchers may be well positioned to lead the type of innovation, evaluation and dissemination being modeled by successful organizations. Resources will need to be deployed wisely, with transparency and accountability. To fully capitalize on their influence, they will need superb communication skills, and to be able to forge strong relationships both within and outside the division. Developing relationships with departmental and hospital leaders should be a primary focus of any new chief.

Given the importance of academic rank and research within many academic departments, the chief might need to qualify for appointment as a professor, have a strong record of funded research, and a nationally recognized area of expertise. Expertise in mentorship, and research career development and funding are essential. Given the importance of managing change, and leading innovation, some search committees may consider those who have been practice innovators, or who have demonstrated expertise in

moving institutions forward to reach a shared vision. New chiefs will need to have a thorough understanding of the financing of health care, and new payment models that support the patient-centered medical home.

Chiefs will need to advocate for resources for general medicine

The chief will need strong clinical skills and provide direct patient care. In divisions that combine hospital medicine with primary care, the chief should have a strong understanding of practice models for each, as well as interest in innovative new approaches to care. Where primary care is particularly challenged given the national crisis, a strong commitment to primary care is key. Keeping such joined divisions together may help address the care management and coordination function that will be so important to enhancing value in healthcare. Where divisions of general medicine are split, efforts must be made to assure strong relationships between faculties of hospital medicine and primary care. The skills of working across disciplines will be important to efforts to integrate care and to define new primary care-subspecialty interactions.

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The new chief should be able to model superb teaching skills and to articulate a compelling vision for the future both within and outside the division. And the chief should be comfortable both with grant funding and philanthropy, as both will be needed to sustain divisions.

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Additional skills include building teams, negotiation, writing business plans, managing and leading change,

performance measurement and improvement, accounting and financial management, and an ability to delegate effectively while insisting on accountability. And since few will be fully prepared for this new role, the chief should be ready to learn, adapt, and continually improve, to take courses to provide needed expertise, and to identify mentors for guidance.”

After being chief for a decade, I know I was not fully prepared for the work to come. But the process of becoming prepared has been fun and challenging. Some advice I might offer to new chiefs includes the following.

“I learned the most by listening to my faculty and staff, and from my colleagues at ACLGIM. Despite becoming chief of an already strong division, I found real opportunity to make a difference. For those starting out now, the challenges are great, but the opportunities are even greater. If you feel ready to take the next step, I encourage you to do so. But be prepared to partner, listen, share, to learn, and to be flexible. And be prepared to learn from everyone with respect. Follow those simple rules, and I am sure you will find your way, and be the kind of division chief your organization needs.”