The Search for Effective Physician Leaders: New Strategies for New Challenges

By Kurt Scott

In this article…

Take a step-by-step look at how to recruit, interview and hire physician leaders.

As health care organizations become increasingly complex and competitive, the search for effective physician leaders becomes a sink-or-swim issue.

Physician executives today must build new programs, fix ailing ones, secure referral and payer networks, manage professional staff, recruit new talent, understand and plan for budgetary and regulatory challenges, and much more.

The hard truth is physician leaders of the past—often senior and very well-respected members of the medical staff promoted into the job—may not have what it takes to lead today.

Here are some suggestions to help you gather the right team, build a solid plan, set expectations, avoid some common pitfalls, and find the best clinical executive for your organization.

Establish your executive search committee

Recruiting physician leaders is one of the most important steps in building or changing the culture of your organization. Go into the process deliberately, with a clear idea of the change you need to make or the standard you need to uphold.

Create a core executive search committee that participates in all physician leadership searches, regardless of program or specialty. Do not create a different committee for each search; you will lose consistency, vision, and the chance to build a team of "super interviewers."

Do plan to add ad hoc members to the core team based on the position you are filling. The committee should be heavily weighted toward physicians. Interview them and select those who will critically assess candidates and are positive and supportive of the position and your effort to fill it.

Most importantly, they must be committed to participating in first-round interviews.

Set clear expectations for the committee's role

Committee members must understand that their role is to evaluate, screen, and recommend candidates, not pick the winner. The final decision must be that of the hiring leader—always.

The committee should present two or three candidates they can support. They may rank them, but given the competitive nature of recruiting, they must be comfortable and supportive of all recommended candidates.

Fine-tune and agree upon selection criteria

Discuss the qualities and experience the perfect candidate would possess. Discuss scenarios that are questionable or raise "yellow flags." Come to consensus on criteria that are required and that are "nice to have." This list helps you evaluate candidates consistently, and it ensures your compliance with equal employment opportunity and affirmative action laws.

Categorize your list and split it up among committee members, making each member consistently responsible for asking questions and assessing candidates in a particular area. This makes the interview process fresh and interesting for both sides.

Of course every interviewer may ask general questions and follow interesting threads of conversation. Provide a quick refresher on legal interviewing. Contact your human resources department for assistance. This is important to the success of your process and the protection of your institution.

Create a "resource compendium"

Compile a resource compendium that includes such things as:

- Organizational chart(s)
- List of personnel (doctors, mid-levels, nurses, administration, and support staff)

Recruiting physician leaders is one of the most important steps in building or changing the culture of your organization. Go into the process deliberately, with a clear idea of the change you need to make or the standard you need to uphold.

- Copies of staff CVs
- Full outline of services provided, programs and special procedures offered, etc.
- Special equipment
- Hours of operation
- Budget reports
- Revenue reports
- Square footage and layout
- Opportunities for growth
- Challenges or roadblocks
- Research activities
- Educational opportunities
- Department turnover and recruitment activities

Start this process early; it will take time.

Screen in before you screen out

Cast your net as widely as possible. You want a large candidate pool going into your recruitment funnel. Yes, it's time-consuming, but it gives you essential context in which to compare candidates.

The screening process gets tougher as candidates work their way through it.

Screening great candidates is relatively easy. So is screening out weak candidates. Your challenge will be to train and motivate committee members to screen candidates who seem to fall in the middle.

The screening process should include:

Self-selection—Make sure the advertising, Web postings, outreach postings, email and direct mail campaigns created for the position contain enough information Physician executives appreciate straightforward, relevant information about compensation, incentives, resources, teaching and research expectations, administrative/clinical mix, and leadership scope. They will need basic community information as well.

Your organization's Web site should give candidates enough information to opt into your recruiting process. The page should branch off your "Careers at…" or "Opportunities for Physicians" section. This page should focus on the position and introduce the candidate to the mission and reputation of the organization and the department, potential colleagues, and related efforts throughout the institution.

This is a great place to expand on the benefits of the position and to highlight community attractions and resources. Include the URL in all advertising.

First phone interview—Use the first call as a high-level screening tool. Cover the items in your criteria lists thoroughly so you know any candidate who makes it to a second interview is qualified.

Be sure to gather as much information as possible about the candidate's experience, personal and professional motivations, and other job prospects or prospecting in the works. It's often easier for professional recruiters to ask some of these questions and speak candidly with the physician about the fit of the job. Let them be your super screeners.

The recruiter can outline the compensation package, but only the hiring manager should negotiate with a candidate.

Second phone interview—Next, a member of the committee should conduct a phone interview with the candidate, using the criteria list to guide the interview. He or she should use open-ended questions to create a dialog that lets the physician's character and personality come through.

Saying, "Give me an example of a time you…," or "Tell me how you handled a situation like…" are great ways to move candidates from generalities to specific, meaningful answers.

Present candidate to committee—The same committee member should present the candidate to the full committee. Building on the profile started by the recruiter in the first phone interview, the committee member should review the candidate's relevant experience, interest in the position, fit with the position and the organization, and any potential red flags. Next is recommending whether the candidate should be invited to the first round of on-site interviews.

On-site interviews—Scheduling may be the hardest and most crucial aspect of on-site interviews. Committee members must be willing to keep their schedules flexible. Remember, desirable candidates are not just desirable to you. There will be competition from other organizations.

It's important to build on the momentum of the initial interviews. All members of the committee should complete a candidate evaluation form the day of the interview.

Spouse recruitment—Paying careful, deliberate attention to the needs and preferences of a candidate's spouse is tremendously important because the spouse contributes at least 50 percent to the overall decision.

Recruit a group of committee members' spouses. The group should include a variety of ages, gender, interests, and work situations. You do not need to ask the entire group to meet with each interviewee's spouse. Pick and choose based on similar interests.

Spouse recruiters should be willing to do some legwork for the family prior to the visit. They may be asked to check out special schools, for example, or to help target areas to include in a tour with a realtor. This team should plan on having lunch with the spouse on interview day, joining the community tour with a realtor, and assisting with introductions at any evening functions.

In the best case, a member of this team will strike up a friendship with the spouse and be available to answer questions during recruitment and help out during relocation if applicable.

On-site interviews that wow them

The competition for great physician leaders is intense. You have to develop an on-site interview process that far exceeds candidates' expectations. Your goal is to have each candidate leave your organization feeling like he or she is the most important candidate.

Customize the interview to the needs and preferences of each candidate. For example, a candidate who expresses an interest in research should spend a good amount of time with leaders and colleagues in that area. Schedule 45 minutes for each interview, with a 15-minute buffer to allow the candidate and host to get to the next interview on time. Make sure water and bathroom facilities are easily accessible.

Always assign a host to shepherd the candidate to interviews and appointments. He or she should be conscientious about maintaining the flow of the day, keeping interviews within time limits, answering questions as they come up, and developing contingency plans if things get off track.

The host should be alert to potential red flags in the candidate's behavior or comments, and alert the hiring manager as soon as possible. This will allow the hiring manager to investigate or address an issue immediately. The host should also be a warm, subtle advocate for the candidate.

A savvy realtor is another important factor. Recruit a realtor who will act and be perceived as an extension of your organization. Make sure the realtor contacts the candidate and spouse before the on-site interview to develop a good understanding of their needs and priorities. The realtor should lead a valuable, time-wise community tour that leaves the candidate and spouse feeling that the community could work for them.

Round one

The first round of on-site interviews should be conducted by committee members plus any ad hoc members closely connected to the search based on position, specialty, or candidate's area of interest.

Remember that ad hoc members should have been recruited to the committee at the outset, and should be very familiar with the position and criteria you have established. For example, if you are recruiting a chair of neurosurgery, you may include the department head of neuroradiology, the vice president of operations for neurosciences, and the department head of neurology.

The committee should discuss and evaluate candidates interviewed each week. Remember, the job of the committee is to recommend candidates with the highest likelihood of success.

Round two

Second-round interviews should be conducted by committee members plus the organization's executive leadership team, including the CEO, CMO, and COO. Leaders from other departments can be included based on the position and the candidate.

Once again members of the spouse recruitment committee should be included. As committee members spend time with the spouse they will uncover any potential family issues that might influence the decision or fit for the position.

For example, in one recent situation a candidate had a son in a challenging magnet high school, despite the son's mild learning disability and need for slight accommodation. A member of the spouse recruitment committee set up appointments for the parents with administrators at two schools in the new town, which gave the parents confidence their son could find a positive fit at one of the schools.

After all second round interviews are complete, the committee should do a final review of all candidates, recommending the top two or three candidates they can fully support. These candidates' profiles and interview summaries should be presented to the hiring manager.

The final step

The hiring leader should ask the top candidates to prepare a department vision statement. These will be up to 30-pages long, including major goals for the next three years, major programs to be developed or enhanced, staffing levels, revenue projections, required resources, potential obstacles or challenges, and major equipment to be purchased.

This is a tall order, but it is feasible to require this of top candidates. Vision statements provide great insight into candidates' experience and perspective. Sometimes your second choice candidate emerges as the top choice through the process. The hiring leader will base his or her decision on the profiles, the interviews, and these statements.

Offer and the close

Closing the deal actually starts during the offer stage. The offer should be made verbally by the hiring manager. Tell the candidate that no paperwork will be sent out until oral agreement is reached.

This may sound strict, but it is very important. It is not at all uncommon for a candidate to take a client's contract or letter of offer and "shop it around" to other potential openings. It's also true that candidates want what they don't have, so the offer letter is a powerful closing tool.

It is more effective to get the candidate to decide if this is truly the position he or she wants, and under what circumstances. Coach the candidate to put together his or her entire list of wants and desires. It is in the candidate's best interest to compile and submit the whole list at one time and not ask for something new in every call, which looks like they are trying to "hold up" your organization.

Once the negotiation process is completed and the candidate accepts the terms, you can send the appropriate paperwork by registered mail, requesting a return receipt. The agreement should expire or be extended after seven days, as you choose.

Now, take a deep breath. It is not often a candidate goes through this process and then turns down the job at the 11th hour.

Kurt Scott

Director of physician search and consulting for VISTA Staffing Solutions based in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

kurt.scott@Vistastaff.com