

Managing New and Realigned Roles in



an Era of Consolidation

By Laura Ramos Hegwer

Pressures to contain costs, improve quality and meet community needs are driving a continued wave of mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances in many regions across the country. One of the consequences of this industry consolidation is that some healthcare executives, particularly those in the C-suite, are bringing their skills and experience to new roles in new types of organizations.

Although the impact of consolidation varies by market, one outcome is that more senior leadership positions are being “systematized.” For example, site CEOs who were fairly autonomous in the past now report to a system CEO or COO and work with a matrix of executives both at the local and system levels, says Donna Padilla, managing partner/leader of Witt/Kieffer’s healthcare practice, Oak Brook, Ill. These new reporting relationships, coupled with the ambiguity that often accompanies new roles, have spurred some healthcare leaders to evaluate the career opportunities within their organizations.

After successfully taking on a steady progression of bigger roles and responsibilities, some high-level executives in consolidated organizations may feel conflicted about taking a lateral or perceived lower-level position. So, what is the best strategy when a career ladder becomes a career lattice, creating paths that not only move up but in other directions as well? Experts offer the following advice for healthcare executives to manage their careers when their own organizations are changing.

Create the Right Mindset

When offered a reduced or realigned role in a consolidated organization, executives should leave their ego at the door, says Michael P. Halter, FACHE, CEO of the Philadelphia market, Tenet Healthcare. “An executive has to be willing to change and recognize that they can make a contribution no matter where they are in the organization,” he says.

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Diana L. “Di” Smalley, RN, FACHE, regional president, Mercy, Oklahoma City, agrees. “If executives are so tied to a particular title or group of responsibilities, then they are not going to fare well in the changing healthcare industry,” Smalley says. On the other hand, leaders who have shown that they are willing to adapt to the new environment are more likely to thrive.

Often, organizations that are looking to recruit or promote talent will review how executives weathered new, reduced or realigned roles, says Jack R. Schlosser, FACHE, consultant, Spencer Stuart, Los Angeles. “If executives sign up enthusiastically for what the organization wants from them and succeed, it can demonstrate that they have been able to adapt and

uncertainty. “But if they need control, lack influencing skills or have an internal reputation for lacking ‘followership,’ they could have a more difficult time adjusting. The same is true if they are overspecialized or are unable to handle a new and varied role.”

Another practical benefit: Meeting a reduced or realigned role with enthusiasm ensures leaders will not burn bridges they may need to cross later in their career when asking for job references. Even if executives are looking for a new position at another organization, they should aim to exceed expectations, say experts.

Leverage Transferable Skills

Although consolidation can bring upheaval—especially in the short

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adjust to a new role, and that can be a positive breakthrough for their career,” he says.

Having an agile mindset also can help leaders in an evolving entity cope with change while directing their teams through uncertainty. Schlosser points out that most healthcare leaders today are able to manage through

term—change can create an opportunity for executives, especially the C-suite, to acquire new skills and explore different organizational cultures. For example, consolidated organizations with matrix structures require executives to work across departments and service lines more so than in the past, according to Padilla. This tests leaders’

More Expert

Healthcare executives whose careers have been affected by consolidation should consider the following suggestions from recruiters and industry veterans.

Find the silver lining. “Sometimes consolidation can mean new resources and a rededication to site-level priorities like quality and excellent patient care,” says Donna Padilla, managing partner and leader, Witt/Kieffer’s healthcare practice, Oak Brook, Ill. In addition to reducing costs, healthcare industry consolidation also creates smaller management teams, which leads to streamlined decision making in an organization.

Don’t let your network get stale. In addition to focusing on their day jobs, executives should tend to their network outside of the organization in case they need a lifeline to a new role, says Jack R. Schlosser, FACHE, consultant, Spencer Stuart, Los Angeles. Speaking at conferences, writing articles and connecting with peers can help leaders maintain and grow their network prior to any consolidation. “If executives are a part of the fabric of the healthcare community, they can oftentimes move fairly smoothly from challenge to challenge and organization to organization, as opposed to those who become isolated or ‘siloeed,’” Schlosser says.

Career Advice

Continue to invest in yourself.

Nancy M. Tinsley, RN, FACHE, president, Rochester (N.Y.) General Hospital, advises leaders to maintain a career development plan that they update annually. She suggests including a list of career advisors to reach out to for key feedback. In addition, she recommends executives stay or become actively involved in professional organizations like ACHE to engage and network throughout their career, regardless of where they are employed.

Seek clarity on your new role. One challenge that can create growing pains for executives, especially if they have achieved longevity in a position or organization, is that new or realigned roles are not always clearly defined, Padilla says. Leaders should make sure they have clarity around their new roles or get their organizations to agree that some roles are meant to be “works in progress” that may evolve over time.

If executives are placed in a position they might not have wanted, they should try not to prejudge it but, rather, research the new role carefully, Tinsley says. “You want to listen, learn, evaluate and understand,” she says. “From there, you can jump into the work.”

Understand your own values. “The times that I have been most uncomfortable in my career was when my values did not align with the values of either my boss or the organization,” says Diana L. “Di” Smalley, RN, FACHE, regional president, Mercy, Oklahoma City. As change and consolidation happen, executives need to reflect on what is most important to them and determine if that is embedded in their new role. If not, it might be time to move on.

Prove your mettle. Volunteering to take on initiatives outside of their job description gives executives more ownership of the organization they work for and provides their employers an opportunity to see them as flexible and willing to take on challenges. “Always give your employer more than what they are paying you for,” Smalley says.

Get help from an executive coach, recruiter or mentor to ask the big questions. According to Padilla, a consolidation can be a good time for executives to reinvestigate sound career strategies they may not have thought about for years. This includes asking questions such as: What are my short- and long-term goals? What skills can I develop? And, what truly satisfies me? “Asking these big career questions can help executives keep their priorities straight and stay focused on their larger career goals even while the immediate pressures of a new organizational structure or role can seem overwhelming,” she says.

Recognize your strengths and areas for improvement before hitting the job market. “Executives need to have a keen sense of their own core competencies and a plan for shoring up areas that might be seen as weaknesses or opportunities for growth,” Padilla says.

Don't disparage new leaders or the new organization. As Michael P. Halter, FACHE, CEO of the Philadelphia market, Tenet Healthcare, puts it, “There's no future in being negative.”

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collaborative skills, requiring them to lead by influence rather than by direct control.

When facing a reorganization, senior leaders should review the applicable

Halter says he has leveraged his listening skills as a leader in a consolidated organization. “When you move from a job as CEO to a position in a consolidated organization, being part of a team becomes essential,” he says. “If

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skills they have gained from working in previous positions. “To be a successful healthcare executive, you must have transferable skills,”

Smalley says. “If you are married to a particular department or discipline, then you have limited your career and narrowed your scope of potential employers.”

Smalley, a Past Chairman Officer of ACHE’s Board of Governors, says early roles working as a nurse manager taught her valuable leadership skills that she has relied upon throughout her 40-plus years in healthcare, including her current role in a large consolidated organization. “How you help people reach their full potential is no different if you are dealing with a nurse, a finance executive or anyone else,” she says.

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Nancy M. Tinsley, RN, FACHE, president, Rochester (N.Y.) General Hospital, says she has been fortunate to have worked in hospitals and health systems that have been integrating for several decades. “The first experience gave me perspective on the value of listening and learning from others and understanding the history and successes of the people, teams and organization,” she says. “With all of this integration came the need to advance the organization and create plans that may have seemed risky and made us all uncomfortable. Getting to success meant focusing on the skills and strengths of the team, challenging each other and always maintaining an optimistic perspective.”

Have a Plan

Tinsley recommends executives in new roles have a clear, objective plan to help them address the “stress points” in the newly merged organization or strategic alliance. As part of the plan, executives might set personal leadership goals that align with new organizational goals, such as learning how to work with a new partner that was once a competitor.

“If the relationship with the new partner is strained from the start, the executive needs to determine how to build trust,” Tinsley says. This might involve working with an executive coach who can role-play discussions with new team members to help the executive refine his or her influencing skills. Executives in new roles also should plan to engage other team members throughout the transition to showcase their skills and help ensure everyone feels valued.

Experts agree that being able to work effectively on a team is an essential leadership skill, particularly for C-suite executives working in new roles in consolidated organizations. “Everybody has talent—the challenge is getting all of that talent to work together,” Halter says.

Prepare for a Career Reboot

Of course, another consequence of consolidation is that some positions are simply phased out due to overlapping roles. According to Padilla, positions at risk tend to be those for which local responsibilities and

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administration can be centralized, such as human resources, finance and marketing. Still, leading organizations recognize that their executive talent can be a competitive advantage. “The top health systems are those that recognize great, talented executives when they have them and strive to find good roles for them,” Padilla says.

If leaders have been laid off or want to transition out of a realigned or reduced role, they can adopt several strategies to showcase their talents for consideration in other roles. To start, Tinsley suggests that before seeking

foundation for personal marketing plans moving forward.

From there, leaders can review potential roles that require the skills they have and those they hope to develop. Tinsley recommends viewing job sites such as ACHE’s Job Center (ache.org/Careers) to determine what positions organizations are hiring for as well as emerging job titles such as chief patient experience officer and population health leadership roles.

When meeting with potential employers, executives should be able to explain—and document with data

use effective communication to motivate others and create buy-in. They also increasingly rely on their communications skills to influence those outside their organizations.

As leaders explore roles in other organizations, they should reach out to their network of trusted colleagues. “Ask them for wisdom and guidance, not just connections for a new job,” Padilla says. She advises executives to always keep up a robust network of colleagues to use as a sounding board. “If they know of opportunities that would be good for you, they will connect the dots and let you know,” she says.

Perhaps most importantly, executives who have been downsized should not take their situation as an indictment of their talents. “It’s not always true that the best person for the job gets the job,” Halter says. Fortunately, most hiring organizations recognize that truth as well.

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new employment, executives should conduct a personal skills assessment, categorizing all their leadership, finance, strategy and operational skills. Then, they should document how they acquired each individual skill. This means detailing what situation they were in, what action they took with their teams and what results they achieved. Such comprehensive records can serve as the

and specific examples—why they, in particular, have achieved various successes in the past, Padilla says.

Executives also should highlight some of today’s more sought-after proficiencies, such as experience reporting to a fiduciary board. Excellent communications skills also are in high demand. Today, the best leaders do not give orders but, rather,

Career Resources

To further plan your career, enhance your leadership, market your abilities and broaden your network, be sure to visit ache.org/CareerResources, where a wealth of tools, tips and other products and services—many complimentary—are available at your fingertips.