



## INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE STRATEGIES™

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# Elevating the Role of the Healthcare Human Resource Leader, Part 2

Presented by Integrated Healthcare Strategies  
as Authored by Kevin Haeberle and Martina Young

In our November 2009 Newsletter issue, we identified four key factors we have seen as common components of a strategic Human Resources Executive and explored more fully the first factor; Wisely Managing the Human Resource Function. With over thirty years experience working with healthcare executives, and the research we have conducted in surveying tens of thousands of leaders, MSA HR Capital, a practice of Integrated Healthcare Strategies, has found “a seat at the table” is more likely to occur for the Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) when the following four factors are evident:

1. The CHRO thinks strategically by ensuring that the resources under their responsibility are managed wisely;
2. The CHRO is viewed as the “people” expert, not just the HR expert, and is regarded by senior executives and the board of trustees as a sought-after advisor on human capital issues;
3. The CHRO has the expertise and ability to help the senior team manage and make decisions on issues involving the overall success of the organization -- not just the success of specific human resource functions;
4. The CHRO has the political and persuasive skills to garner the support of the senior executive team to place specific “people” initiatives at the same value and importance level as financial, clinical, or quality initiatives.

In this article we will further explore the second key factor - being seen as a sought-after “People Advisor” for the Board or other Executives.

## **Being the “People” Advisor**

People are the driving force of any organization. Especially in healthcare, the caring business where people are taking care of people. Being the People Advisor involves not only understanding and developing an engaged employee environment, but also being the strategic “People Advisor” to other executive team members and the board of directors. The three areas of expertise that can elevate the HR Leader to the People Advisor are the following:

1. Being aware of the alignment among the levels of leadership and employees
2. Understanding the psychological aspects of engaging and motivating employees
3. Creating an environment of mutual trust based on a professional, adult and transparent relationship.

### **Alignment**

There are typically four levels of leadership within a healthcare organization; Board Members, Executives, Directors and Managers, and first level supervisors and team leaders. Based on the research through our MSA HR Capital Employee and Leadership Survey, high performing health care organizations have a common characteristic – a high level of alignment among leaders and employees. Alignment is composed of three parts – a common understanding of the direction and outcome the organization desires, gaining ‘buy in’ or acceptance of that direction, and providing the resources to achieve the desired outcomes. It is important that employees view the various levels of management as working in unison and being on the same strategic page with the mission, vision and values of the organization, as well as delivering the same messages to employees.

If leadership is not tightly aligned, employees will have difficulty working with the organization to move forward effectively. It may sound odd, but it is better for employees to view ‘all’ of management negatively at a common level, then to perceive middle management more positively than senior leadership or vice versa. It is imperative that a true People Advisor be aware of the level of alignment of the leadership within the organization and, if misalignment is apparent, develop strategies to reduce the gaps in leadership alignment within the organization.

Many times organizations go to employees directly when they struggle with alignment and skip connecting leadership first, just assuming that because they are in leadership, that there is a common understanding and acceptance of the stated direction. An all day, facilitated session, devoted exclusively to discussing and starting the process of leadership alignment can be quite valuable when a disconnect is evident from survey information or other data.

### **Engagement**

Moving from satisfaction to engagement is the newest employee development strategy for healthcare. Engagement is basically a mutual trust between employees and leadership. We typically think engagement is when employees trust leadership, but it is important to recognize that full engagement does not occur unless management fully trusts employees.

Although trusting all employees may not be possible, since our findings over the past thirty-five years have consistently shown that 7-9% of employees in any organization are inherently negative and it is difficult to place trust in them, it is possible to develop a highly trusting and engaged relationship with the majority of employees. Anywhere from 35% to 75% of employees are intrinsically motivated to perform within the organization and help it move forward if there is a mutual trusting and engaged relationship developed. A HR Leader can help foster engagement by working with leaders to identify the engaged and potentially engaged employees and cultivating them to improve performance in their area, and eventually the organization as a whole. Establishing a concept of a model employee, and recognizing and encouraging those who best meet that definition, helps develop a more engaged workforce overall.

### Professional Environment

Another driver for a successful organization, and also another area that an HR Leader can use to elevate their role, is the relationship of the organization with employees. Through our extensive research and experience consulting with healthcare organizations, we have found that organizations that develop a professional, adult relationship with employees have higher productivity, a natural motivational environment and increased flexibility. Included in this professional relationship is transparent communications with employees about issues such as budget cuts, compensation, potential layoffs, or potential salary freezes. Creating a theme of 'telling employees everything unless there is a legitimate reason not to inform' (confidential, timing) as compared to a more common communication approach of 'not telling employees anything unless there is a good reason to inform', is a fundamental component of creating a more engaged and aligned employee.

We find that HR Leaders with the ability to help the organization foster this open relationship with employees are also able to elevate their role. It is some times a difficult challenge, especially when there is a percentage of employees who struggle with behaving as adults. In addition, healthcare is inherently nurturing and leadership and employees tend to gravitate to a 'take care of us' mind set, based on paternal or maternal characteristics. Breaking out of this mode can result in initial pushback, both from leaders and employees, but we have found over time the transition is remarkable and fundamentally changes and improves the organization. Something as simple as removing the concept of 'discipline' from our language indicates a more professional, adult relationship, since we typically discipline children with judgment about the appropriateness of their behavior. In a more adult relationship we speak of setting reasonable expectations - without judgment as to whether someone is 'good' or 'bad' for failing to meet those expectations – but simply the relationship is based on mutual expectations and that if those expectations are not met, the relationship ends (another language change from 'termination' to 'ending the relationship').

When a HR Leader is able to use their skills to improve the three areas of leadership alignment, engagement, and creating a professional environment within their organization, it is likely that HR Leader will become a the "People Advisor" to the executive team and the Board of Directors.

In our next newsletter, we will explore the HR Leader's role as a Business Advisor to the Senior Executive Team and Board of Directors in areas outside of Human Resources.

### ***About MSA HR Capital***

*Integrated Healthcare Strategies provides clients with the most comprehensive array of healthcare-specific consulting services available through our five integrated specialty practices. Our MSA HR Capital practice helps clients develop a human resources organization that supports their strategic goals. MSA HR Capital provides comparative data from over 1,000 hospital organizations to tailor solutions for your specific work environment to ensure that you reach objectives by integrating your management, compensation, labor relations and employee engagement goals into one seamlessly operating strategy. Our process is simple - turn data into information which helps develop more knowledge and better decisions and positive actions. For more information, visit [www.IHStrategies.com](http://www.IHStrategies.com).*

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