Exceptional Leadership
16 Critical Competencies for Healthcare Executives

Carson F. Dye and Andrew N. Garman

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INTRODUCTION

Today’s healthcare executives face a vast array of complicated problems, including staff shortages, rising costs, and increasing government regulation. The healthcare industry is a high-stress, high-risk environment; luckily, passionate workers have continued to take on the challenges of healthcare with grace and confidence. As in all industries, however, executives must work to achieve balance in all aspects of the job. When lives are on the line, the importance of effective leadership could not be greater.

In Exceptional Leadership, authors Carson F. Dye and Andrew N. Garman identify the 16 characteristics of outstanding healthcare leaders. Drawing on decades of healthcare experience and research, the authors identify the patterns of behavior that drive success as well as failure. The book outlines the skills necessary to build healthy relationships, achieve an organizational vision, and ultimately save lives.

THE LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY MODEL

Dye and Garman's Leadership Competency Model consists of 16 competencies, or skills, that must be mastered in order to become an exceptional leader. These competencies fall under four “cornerstones,” which include:

- Cornerstone 1: Well-cultivated self-awareness
- Cornerstone 2: Compelling vision
- Cornerstone 3: Real way with people
- Cornerstone 4: Masterful style of execution

Well-cultivated self-awareness includes the competencies necessary to understand oneself as a leader, including strengths, limitations, hot buttons, and blind spots. Compelling vision involves being vision-
ary, communicating vision, and earning loyalty and trust among employees. Having a real way with people requires competencies in the areas of interpersonal communication and relationship-building. A masterful style of execution requires competencies related to decision-making and appropriate uses of power in the workplace.

These four cornerstones rest on a single foundation: a healthy self-concept. Leaders with a healthy self-concept are satisfied with their place in the world, have a positive self-image, are confident in their ability to achieve greatness, and feel comfortable with how they relate to others. While it is possible for leaders to go far without a healthy self-concept, their achievements often come at the expense of others. These leaders often use fear, intimidation, and political manipulation to push their agendas, which can do enormous damage to positive organizational culture. Leaders with a low self-concept should enlist the help of others to build on their strengths and iron out some of their weaknesses.

Each chapter in Exceptional Leadership is dedicated to one of the 16 competencies. For each competency, the authors describe its proper use, underuse, and overuse or misuse. They also include ways to find role models for each competency, as well as other general tips on improving one’s practices in a particular area.

**Cornerstone One:**
**Well-Cultivated Self-Awareness**

*Living by Conviction*

Exceptional leaders are strongly driven by their personal convictions, which may include religious beliefs, deeply held connections to a community, or a fundamental sense of morality. Personal convictions allow leaders to push through difficult times for the good of a company, and they are especially helpful in dealing with setbacks and professional disappointments.

Truly exceptional leaders are often described by their employees as “highly principled.” Not only do they know their values and beliefs; they are also comfortable discussing them and explaining them to others. These leaders also know when to keep their convictions in check, especially when it is necessary to make room for others’ viewpoints. Exceptional leaders recognize that their personal convictions are

**Key Concepts**

In *Exceptional Leadership*, the authors present advice for executives looking to build healthy relationships and foster both creativity and productivity in the workplace.

- The best way for a leader to build trust is to be accessible. Stepping outside the office sends a powerful message that communication is valued in the workplace.
- Active listening is the most important part of interpersonal communication. Exceptional leaders understand that all messages come from individuals trying to meet certain needs.
- Leaders must achieve a balance in their feedback; exceptional leaders strive to give equal amounts of positive and constructive comments.
- Exceptional leaders begin the team-building process by selecting the right people for the job, then move on to building trust and cohesiveness among team members.
- Highly effective leaders understand that different workers are motivated by different things, and they adjust their motivational strategies on an individual basis.
- Leaders should strive to master a variety of leadership styles, which can be adjusted to fit certain problems or groups of people.

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not universal, and they make no attempt to force their beliefs onto others. In addition, effective leaders have high integrity and ethics.

Leaders who do not live by their personal convictions often display negative patterns in the workplace. These leaders may change courses often at the expense of workers, or they may sacrifice individual goals for the good of the team. They may overvalue their own perspective, or exhibit an overly moralistic, “holier-than-thou” attitude that may offend workers. Personal convictions can create blind spots for leaders, making their decisions less trustworthy and straining workplace relationships.

Leaders who have a hard time applying their personal beliefs in the workplace should find a role model to guide them. These leaders should find someone who truly lives by their principles in the workplace; good places to look are faith-based organizations or secular organizations run by former clergy members.

Possessing Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the knowledge needed to effectively communicate on an interpersonal level. Good communication in the workplace involves understanding others’ emotions while managing one’s own emotional responses. Because relationships are the primary driver for both success and failure, emotional intelligence is one of the most critical competencies for exceptional leadership.

Highly effective leaders achieve a balance between self-interest (serving one’s own needs) and selfless interest (serving the needs of others). Leaders who are too selfish will fail to develop influence in an organization, while leaders who are too selfless will face great difficulty in maintaining their familial relationships, health, and well-being. Leaders must also strike a balance between engaging others and maintaining distance, as well as between self-trust and trust in others.

Understanding and working with other people’s emotions while understanding and managing your own emotional responses requires emotional intelligence.

Leaders with low emotional intelligence may display a general lack of concern for others. These leaders are often so wrapped up in the company’s mission that they fail to consider the needs of employees or peers. Some leaders may display a constant need for approval, while others may be emotionally volatile or have a hard time trusting others.

Too much emotional intelligence can also be a problem; some executives get by on their good graces alone, despite their lack of qualification or results. Leaders may also place too much emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of work, devoting too much time to solving personal issues and discussing personal or professional relationships.

Role models for the emotional intelligence competency tend to be found in areas such as human resources, pastoral care, counseling, or social services; these jobs require a high emotional intelligence in order to succeed. The best way to improve one’s emotional intelligence is to gain feedback from others. One particularly effective feedback tool is the Johari Window, a survey that compares a person’s ideas about themselves with those of their peers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Cornerstone Two: Compelling Vision

Being Visionary

Vision refers to a leader’s capacity to create effective plans for an organization based on a clear understanding of trends, uncertainties, risks, and rewards.
Exceptional leaders in healthcare are often keenly aware of emerging trends, and they place their company in a position to take advantage of technological or cultural opportunities. Because organizations with visionary leaders are often viewed as highly successful, this is one of the most sought-after competencies among healthcare executives.

While good leaders monitor trends in the healthcare industry, truly exceptional leaders recognize that trends may be discovered through more unorthodox channels outside of healthcare. The Internet can be especially helpful in making connections between healthcare firms and emerging technologies; breakthroughs in one area may eventually have a profound effect on an area that seems completely unrelated.

Leaders can damage daily operations by underemphasizing or overemphasizing the vision. Some leaders focus too much on tactical operations and find themselves putting out “daily fires,” while others place too much focus on the planning stages and never take strides toward the achievement of a vision. Visions also suffer when they are too tightly bound to a single leader; this discourages the use of divergent perspectives, and many employees will avoid questioning leaders simply to stay on their good side.

For low-level leaders who want to improve their vision, senior executives may be good role models. High-level leaders may need to look outside the healthcare industry for good examples to follow. One can be sure that a visionary leader is behind any business that has gone from “good” to “great;” looking for these kinds of success stories is the best way to improve one’s sense of vision in the workplace.

Communicating Vision

Exceptional leaders also must possess the ability to communicate their vision. Whereas a good vision explains how the organization will benefit from a new strategy, an exceptional vision describes how the entire world will benefit from the work of each individual in the organization. Effective communication aids collaboration by ensuring that everyone is “on the same page.”

Communication of a vision must be exceptionally clear, and the message must reach everyone who will be responsible for its implementation. Exceptional leaders use a wide variety of communication styles to ensure that the message permeates, and they often use techniques to make the message “stick” in the mind. Messages should be straightforward, novel, and if at all possible, “catchy” in one way or another. Exceptional leaders make sure that a message is not only heard but also discussed afterwards.

Less effective communication is often the result of a lack of clarity, focus, or information. Some leaders fail to express how the vision will affect everyone, or how everyone will affect the vision. Alternately, communication can suffer when leaders bombard the audience with too much information or express the vision too specifically. Timetables, for example, are not appropriate for a company’s vision, since they allow the vision to be objectively proved or disproved from the beginning. Employees who consider a certain time frame unrealistic will abandon the strategy immediately.

In order to find a role model for this competency, leaders should find people who are especially compelling to listen to, or who others seem to listen to the most. These people are not always in positions of formal power, but they do wield a great amount of influence in the workplace and are generally respected and trusted. Leaders who want to develop their public speaking skills may consider a public speaking course, such as those offered by Toastmasters International.

Earning Loyalty and Trust

Before a vision can be successfully put into action, trust with stakeholders must be established. According to the authors, people are naturally suspicious of leaders, and the development of trust is therefore vital to effective leadership; trust functions as the “glue” that holds organizations together.

The easiest way for a leader to build trust is to be accessible. While some leaders assume that an “open door”
policy will encourage workers to visit and discuss concerns, the authors argue that leaders can send a much stronger message by stepping out of the office and speaking with employees on a daily basis. Exceptional leaders will actively cultivate an environment of openness and psychological safety, ensuring that employees can speak their mind without fear of punishment. Highly effective leaders demonstrate role-modeling throughout their day-to-day operations; if there are sacrifices to be made, they will be the first to do so.

Ineffective leaders are often inaccessible and fail to follow through on promises. These leaders may also blame or assign credit to the wrong person, making employees frustrated or fearful. Some ineffective leaders communicate too directly, discourage dissenting opinions, or foster loyalty by devaluing other groups within the organization.

To find a role model for the loyalty and trust competency, leaders should look for individuals who have a high rate of retention in their department, or individuals who brought significant numbers of workers with them when they arrived. Leaders can also select role models by identifying individuals they trust greatly. Like many of the other competencies, feedback is the best way to improve one's ability to generate trust and loyalty in the workplaces.

**Cornerstone Three:**
**Real Way With People**

**Listening Like You Mean It**

Active listening allows leaders to better understand the goals, priorities, and perspectives of their employees. This makes everyday dialogues more meaningful, which results in higher levels of interpersonal trust.

Exceptional leaders understand that all messages are created by individuals who are trying to meet certain needs. It is important to determine the “why” behind a message—the circumstances that have led to the statement, presentation, or request. Through their words and actions, effective listeners demonstrate that they value the messenger, and they confirm the validity of the messenger’s thoughts and opinions, even in a disagreement.

Less effective leaders tend to listen inattentively or tune out information they disagree with. These types of leaders often send indirect messages that tell the speaker their message is not valued or will not be considered. While listening, some leaders may grow impatient or even emotionally volatile, damaging the open environment necessary for effective interpersonal communication. Other leaders overemphasize listening and use it as an excuse to avoid action.

Good role models for active listening can be found in professions where active listening is a necessary skill, such as counselors, therapists, or HR professionals. Leaders who want to improve their listening skills should focus on developing an active listening posture, summarizing messages, asking probing questions, monitoring their emotions, and continuously seeking feedback from others.

Giving Feedback

Feedback refers to the delivery of information about performance. It is most useful when it is objective, specific, and given as soon as possible after the behavior in question. It is also beneficial to end feedback on a positive note. Leaders must achieve balance in their use of feedback, as it is critical to the self-esteem and productivity of all employees.

Exceptional leaders first make sure the cost of giving feedback is worth the return. Some issues are better left alone, and leaders who give excessive feedback risk wasting time and having a less focused team. Effective leaders also strive to give equal amounts of positive and constructive feedback throughout the day.

Less effective leaders can be reluctant to critique, avoiding the use of feedback until it is absolutely necessary. In healthcare, it can be especially difficult to offer constructive criticism, as healthcare workers work long hours under enormous pressure. Leaders can also be reluctant to praise workers; since leaders often focus on fixing problems, it can be easy to overlook the things that are going well.
Role models for the feedback competency can often be found in the human resources department, or any other area that requires exceptional interpersonal communication skills.

**Mentoring Others**

Mentoring is a broad term that refers to all the actions leaders take to support the long-term growth of their employees. Under exceptional leaders, workers feel that they are moving ahead in both their careers and their lives, and they are able to continuously expand their responsibilities with grace and confidence.

Exceptional leaders do not focus their attention on a single employee; rather, they are concerned with the growth of all direct reports. The goal of an exceptional leader is to make good organizations great, and to make great organizations world-class. Effective leaders have a thorough knowledge of their employees’ interests and goals, and they make a long-term commitment to helping employees achieve their potential.

Leaders should not feel threatened by the possibility of high-performing staff leaving the organization; they should understand that employees with exceptional mentors are the ones most likely to stay.

Mentoring will be most powerful when it focuses on individuals’ needs as well as the needs of the organization. The first step in this process is developing a clear understanding of your direct reports’ interests and goals.

Less effective leaders may undervalue mentoring and staff development, or suffer from a general lack of mentoring skills. Some leaders overemphasize star performance or, conversely, fail to address performance problems, often due to deep personal relationships with employees.

The best way to find a role model for the mentoring competency is to look for leaders who have promoted a significant number of direct reports. Some companies have formal mentoring programs in place, many of which identify top mentors who will make good role models.

**Developing Teams**

In the workplace, a team can be loosely defined as a group of people with common goals whose success involves the interdependence of the group members. When developing teams, exceptional leaders often follow an informal five-step process:

1. Find the best people for team roles.
2. Develop the team’s orientation toward a common vision.
3. Develop trust among team members.
4. Develop cohesiveness between team members.
5. Resolve inevitable conflicts between team members.

Less effective leaders may suffer from maintaining too much control over a team; members must be allowed to weigh in on issues and ask questions to be effective. Teams can suffer when leaders place too much emphasis on individual roles, possibly by recognizing individual achievements rather than the achievements of the group. Some leaders use teams when the problem calls for a singular vision, while other leaders neglect to use teams when they are necessary. Teams can also suffer from a “country club” atmosphere: productivity can slow when comfort is the main emphasis of the group meeting.

Team-building role models can be found in community service or faith-based programs. Participating in teams can help a leader gain a fuller understanding of the team dynamic and improve the communication skills necessary to lead a group of people with divergent perspectives.

**Energizing Staff**

Energizing staff refers to the activities leaders use to increase motivation in the workplace. In healthcare, this is often done by helping workers reconnect with the reasons they entered the industry in the first place.

Exceptional leaders understand that different people are motivated by different things, and they adjust their approaches accordingly. Some people enjoy the spotlight, while others feel embarrassed by extra attention. In all cases, effective leaders make sure to celebrate success as often as possible, in the most appropriate way.
Less effective leaders may undervalue motivation; oftentimes these leaders assume that a worker’s primary motivation for performance is a paycheck. Motivation can suffer when leaders employ a one-size-fits-all approach, which generates limited results when rallying staff. Conversely, leaders can overvalue motivation or display too much energy in the workplace, which can create a stressful environment.

Entrepreneurs are often good role models for the motivation competency, as they usually work with limited material rewards in the early stages of their business. Other role models can be found in volunteer organizations; the leaders of these groups are highly experienced in rallying others around a worthy cause.

Generating Informal Power

Informal power refers to a leader’s ability to influence others without resorting to formal authority. While former power uses organizational rules and procedures to drive performance, informal power relies more on a leader’s interpersonal communication skills and goodwill generated in the past.

Exceptional leaders will be very selective in choosing those with whom they will develop relationships. The “return” on forming a working partnership with someone in the workplace must be higher than the “cost,” so leaders should focus their attention on the individuals most likely to help them in the future. Since informal power is often based on a “favors” system, it is vital for leaders to follow through on their promises and repay any debts in the workplace.

Less effective leaders may focus too much on their personal agendas and use their informal networks to achieve their own goals rather than those of the organization. Some leaders enjoy the relationship-building aspect of work to a fault, and informal networking becomes the end rather than the means. If a leader is not careful, the workplace can become a competitive arena full of winners and losers. This type of environment is harmful to the productivity and self-esteem of all employees.

To find a role model for the informal power competency, one should look for individuals whose power seems to be far higher than their position dictates. These individuals are often promoted faster than others and assume responsibilities across many departments.

Cornerstone Four: Masterful Execution

Building Consensus

Building consensus refers to a leader’s ability to gain the necessary support for critical decisions. Because it is often impossible to find solutions that satisfy everyone in the organization, it is vital that leaders gain the approval of the right people, through appropriate, trust-building methods.

Exceptional leaders first must identify which decisions require consensus and which do not. These leaders let their teams know ahead of time whether or not their input will affect the final decision. Sometimes, leaders may ask for input but reserve the right to make the decision, while other times they may allow team members to reach a compromise before moving forward. Most often, leaders must simply achieve a level of support that is “good enough;” this level will be determined by the type of decision and the people involved.

Leaders who do take their informal networks seriously may still fall short if they do not invest their effort in the right people. Some leaders do not give enough thought to why they are building a network in terms of the capacity it should yield.

Less effective leaders may be threatened by the process for building consensus; they may feel that the process legitimizes any dissenting viewpoints. Other leaders simply see consensus-building as a waste of time and money. Conversely, leaders can place too much emphasis on consensus-building, spending valuable resources in order to gain the support of everyone in the organization when only a few are necessary to move forward.

Consultants are often good choices for role models in this competency, as are Six Sigma and Lean Management authorities. These professionals build their careers on gaining the support of others, and they have developed the interpersonal communication skills necessary to do so.
Making Decisions

Decision-making involves any choice between multiple actions or directions. While many regard good decision-making as a product of a leader’s intelligence and experience, it is equally dependent on good decision-making processes.

Exceptional leaders have a good sense of timing when it comes to making decisions; in the workplace, not all decisions require immediate action. These leaders first decide the best approach to the decision, asking themselves who will be affected, how much of a role others will play in the decision, and what information may be necessary to make an informed decision. Exceptional leaders are also adept at explaining why the decision was made.

The art of consensus building involves developing the levels of support needed to move initiatives forward without causing some individuals to feel left behind, slighted, or otherwise powerless to affect the organization.

Ineffective leaders can be fearful of making decisions, or they may be inclined to make decisions too quickly. Some leaders avoid decision-making by overanalyzing the risks and rewards. Other leaders are overconfident in their decision-making skills, leading them to skip steps in the process or to ignore relevant data.

Good role models for decision-making are often found among senior executives. These leaders’ roles require both a high quantity and a high quality of decision-making. Chief operating officers and executive vice presidents may be especially good role models.

Driving Results

Driving results refers to a leader’s ability to define, monitor, and ensure high performance among staff. While it is easy to spot high-performing organizations, it is more difficult to identify the leaders who drive success. However, many of these leaders display similar patterns of behavior in the workplace, including:

• The ability to stay focused
• Extreme organizational skills

• Seemingly boundless energy
• The ability to recognize process improvement opportunities

Leaders who fail to drive results often suffer from a lack of energy or motivation; these leaders will procrastinate or abandon efforts at the first sign of difficulty. Leaders with poor organizational skills may have a negative impact on results as a result of simple things like inadequately preparing for meetings or failing to monitor progress. Organizations may also suffer from a leader’s tendency to overemphasize working relationships or, conversely, a tendency to overemphasize performance. Leaders may fall into these traps based on a need to be liked in the office or based on a drive toward personal goals rather than organizational goals.

Role models for this competency are often easy to spot because they have a long list of achievements in the industry. When choosing a role model, look to individuals whom others choose to lead large, complicated projects.

Stimulating Creativity

Stimulating creativity involves fostering a work environment that encourages creative or innovative problem-solving. Stimulating creativity is critical to exceptional leadership because breakthrough organizations by definition require new levels of performance. Creative organizations are often the first to the market, and they generally attract and retain the best employees.

Stimulating creativity should not be confused with being creative. Many leaders are not exceptionally creative themselves but are experts in fostering the creativity of others. In order to stimulate creativity, exceptional leaders maintain a positive attitude toward challenges, help employees see problems from varying perspectives, and are highly effective at facilitating brainstorming sessions. Exceptional leaders are also adept at synthesizing the ideas of others into a coherent whole, identifying common trends and articulating them for the team’s consideration.

Less effective leaders may suffer from a conservative approach to problem-solving, and therefore they stick to the practices that have worked well in the
past. Some leaders are exceptionally creative themselves but fail to involve the team in meaningful ways. Creative leaders may also enjoy the brainstorming process for its own sake; these leaders may be frustrated when team members point out the realistic limitations of the organization.

Role models for this competency can be found in areas where creativity is vital, such as marketing, management, communication, or philanthropy. Outside of healthcare, advertising agencies and design firms are good places to find creative individuals and work environments.

Cultivating Adaptability

In the workplace, adaptability requires three fundamental skills: reading the environment, weighing appropriate courses of action, and responding with an appropriate leadership style. To be adaptable, leaders must have a keen awareness of organizational dynamics and how they might be adjusted to fit a particular problem.

Exceptional leaders have mastered a wide variety of leadership styles and are able to choose the style that is most appropriate in the given context. Some of these leadership styles include:

- **Autocratic** – Leaders make unilateral decisions and hold employees accountable.
- **Inspirational** – Leaders reach out to employees in a way that energizes them about a particular vision.
- **Democratic** – Employees are heavily involved in the decision-making process; the leader functions merely as a facilitator.
- **Encouraging** – Leaders focus on the individual needs of their staff.
- **Standards setting** – Leaders focus on the processes in the workplace—how they can be measured and improved, as well as who will be held accountable.
- **Coaching** – Leaders focus on the growth and development of their employees.

Less effective leaders tend to have a single dominant leadership style, and they are unwilling to recognize when the style is not working. Conversely, leaders can be too adaptable in the workplace, causing them to change the organization’s course quickly or change leadership styles erratically.

Operations executives are good role models for this competency, as they face unexpected twists and turns on a daily basis. Leaders who spend significant amounts of time with physicians also tend to be extremely adaptable.

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**FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

**Reading Time: 4-6 hours, 227 pages**

**Exceptional Leadership** is a tightly organized guide to the characteristics that make an exceptional healthcare leader. The book is broken down into 16 sections, each of which details a particular competency necessary for outstanding leadership in the healthcare industry. Each chapter begins with an anecdote that illustrates a particular competency in action, and goes on to detail both proper and improper applications of the competency. At the end of each chapter, the author suggests additional reading that addresses the competency in greater detail. The five appendices also provide the reader with tools for self-assessment, especially in the more challenging areas of healthcare leadership.

Though the book is mainly intended for healthcare executives, very few of the practices suggested are specific to healthcare issues or scenarios. The book is concise and very clearly structured, making it a quick and enjoyable read for executives in just about any industry.
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About the Author
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