

# Three key traits for mission-focused executives

MetroHealth's chief lobbyist, Tracy Carter, identifies core principles to succeed in a challenging environment

A C-Suite Conversation with

**Tracy Carter**

VP of Government Relations, MetroHealth System



The Companies of MPI



As the chief lobbyist for MetroHealth, the second largest public hospital in Ohio, Tracy Carter measures the success of her leadership a little differently than a typical hospital executive.

"It's been my most significant work," she says of lobbying. "Whenever you can partner with legislators to enact policy to impact millions of people, that's gratifying."

Carter's patient-centered focus is on Medicaid patients, some of the most vulnerable in our country, she says. She refutes stereotypes of the typical Medicaid patient, noting that "some of them are working three jobs just to get by."

"Tracy partners with legislators to serve patients," notes Akram Boutros, MD, president and CEO of MetroHealth. "Her leadership has helped thousands access Medicaid coverage."

In most companies, financial results are a key measure of a leader's effectiveness and here, too, is a measure of Carter's resolve and success.

In an atmosphere where Medicaid has many detractors and opponents, Carter not only successfully led efforts to preserve coverage for thousands, she also equipped her team to effectively lobby against millions in rate cuts while accessing a government program that will strengthen the hospital's ability to serve Medicaid patients over the next two years.

"The blessing," she says, "is that we have a good relationship with the Department of Medicaid to go in and say, 'Are you aware of this unintended consequence to Ohioans if you adopt this policy? Could we consider another solution?' We appreciate the partnership we have with federal and state leaders to benefit patients."

## Mission-focused leadership

In a typical organization, a leader must generate internal buy-in and

commitment as the members of the team strive toward the same goal. Employee engagement and alignment to a business plan or the vision and values of a company are an important focus. Yet, in lobbying, leaders must create consensus and even convince opponents to completely change their thinking on an issue. That can be a taller task.

"Sometimes, it feels like we deal with the same issues but on different days," she says. "It's like playing whack-a-mole. We tackle one issue and it pops up again in another form. This lobbying work is not for the weary. You have to stay focused on the patient and that's what fuels you to keep fighting."

While the mission of healthcare is a compelling focus for many health-system CEOs, the best are able to find ways to innovate and achieve business goals – which enables them to expand and reach more patients.

In Carter's 30 years in healthcare, she has worked with a variety of leaders in her time at MetroHealth and the Summa Health System in Akron, Ohio. She says the best have always been able to "adapt quickly" to a changing environment. They've

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also been good at spotting gaps in their leadership teams and recruiting and developing talent to shore up those areas.

She's also seen the needs of health systems and their patients change dramatically. Going forward, Carter says she believes the most successful healthcare leaders need the following traits:

1. **A resolve to be patient-centered.** "Leaders need to be bold in saying that we can do better by our patients. We're closest to them and know what is needed to yield better service and value to them. Organizations will continue to thrive if they are patient-centered."
2. **A dedication to empowering their leadership team.** "Good leaders invest in their most valuable asset—staff. Ensuring staff members have the necessary education, training and support to be successful is a leader's primary responsibility."
3. **An ability to be inspirational.** "There's a lot of uncertainty going on in healthcare but, through it all, if you can inspire people to stay the course, and stay focused on the patient, all will be well. You won't veer too far from your mission, vision and values. That's what's going to hold you through the good times and the bad times."

How do you develop a mission-focused team? Once you have organized your leadership team, whether through promotion or recruitment, the task of leadership development isn't finished – in fact, it's just beginning.

## EXECUTIVE'S TOOLKIT: Driving diversity through action

Some in business are beginning to refer to "DEI" efforts and measurements (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) in showing how interconnected these concepts are. And, in healthcare especially, equity remains a driving force in our actions around diversity.

Laura Sherbin and Ripa Rashid of the Center for Talent Innovation cite four factors that can turn diversity into inclusion:

- **Inclusive leaders** who create a safe environment for team members to share opinions and new ideas, and who share credit and empower team members to make decisions.
- **Authenticity** is closely tied to this, allowing team members to share their true selves instead of being fearful to express individual traits that don't conform to the company norm.
- Creating opportunities for **networking and visibility** that address leadership gaps through true sponsorship and championing of executives who merit promotion.
- **Clarifying career paths** for people who are not Caucasian males. This greatly affects women (45 percent of whom leave a career path, even if it is temporary, to take care of children), but also ethnic minorities and LGBT workers. «Ironically,» note Sherbin and Rashid, "it's usually the majority group that presumes to identify the reason these people aren't advancing."

Think about the organizations that you consider most effective in advancing diverse leaders into top positions. Does their commitment start at the board level? What are the best leadership development experiences that you have benefited from?

The leaders on your team need alignment on the vision, mission and values of the organization, not simply their department. Assessment and executive development can ensure that your leaders are meshing and executing well. Think of a rowing team, where the members move as one with powerful results.

### Enhancing leaders through mentorship

Mentors help too. Statistics from the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reveal

that 71 percent of companies in the Fortune 500 have a mentorship program. The ASTD also reported that 75 percent of leaders in the private sector said that having a mentor helped them attain their current position. Carter credits Dr. Al Gilbert, the now-retired CEO of Summa Health, with playing a major role in her life.

He did more than just mentor her throughout college via the Inroads program, which provided minority students with role models

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and summer employment. Gilbert became her champion. He encouraged her to get a master's in health administration at the University of Michigan and he gave her a fellowship and eventually a permanent job after she finished.

Gilbert also shaped her recognition of the responsibilities of leadership with his early dedication to diversity in healthcare leadership.

"He was very influential and intentional with diversity," Carter says. "He worked in an environment where he didn't see women and minorities ascending to the top, and when he got into a place of leadership, he said, 'I can do something about that.' And he did. Imagine what would happen if more CEOs used their power to advance diversity like my mentor did."

As a leader, you have much to offer your organization. Whether you are part of the C-suite or the board, you have the privilege of extending your organization's

mission by mentoring and championing other leaders.

Mentorship is shown to improve employee engagement and job satisfaction, both for the mentor and the mentee.

You may want to consider identifying possible mentorship roles for your leadership team, and ways to work together with the board to ensure that diversity of thought and experience is built into the leadership and governance structure of your organization.

### Diverse teams deliver success

In studies, diverse leadership teams have been proven to be more financially successful and innovative than a monolith. Researchers from North Carolina State University and Portland State University recently studied ethnic and gender diversity. They found that companies with policies in place that value diversity "are more innovative, value intangibles

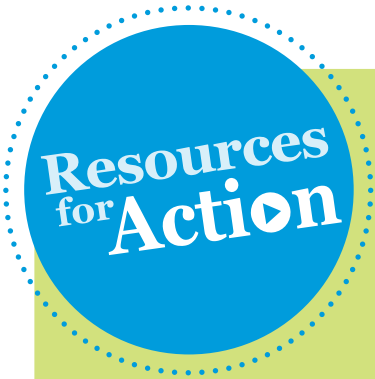
and human capital more highly, have greater growth options, have higher cash flow and have stronger governance."

Ethnic and gender diversity not only improve employee engagement internally but, in the case of hospitals and health systems, achieve the need for leaders to reflect the communities and patient populations they serve.

Now that she is an industry leader herself, Carter says more diversity in leadership needs to come from the boardroom if it is to take root in an organization.

"It's not going happen by itself. You've got to have people in power to transform the complexion of the governance and leadership structures. I'm in an organization now that's making significant strides – diversity is something that our top leaders value and practice. And that's what I appreciate about them.

"They're about action more than words." MPI



## ARTICLE: Diverse teams deliver innovation, success and profitability

Commitment to diversity is a sound business practice. In fact, the evidence from many studies indicates organizations that are committed to diversity in their leadership ranks are better run and more profitable than those that aren't.

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