Leadership Development and Succession Planning in Case Management

Kathleen Miodonski, RN, BSN, CMAC, and Patricia Hines, PhD, RN

ABSTRACT

Purpose/Objectives: The director of case management is one of health care’s leadership positions most frequently in demand. The lack of qualified and effective case management leaders will continue to be an issue for organizations for years to come, influenced by increasing pressures on health care reimbursement and the aging case management workforce. Organizations have an opportunity to create a program to develop future case management leaders from their internal talent.

Primary Practice Setting(s): The proposed strategies are designed for the acute care hospital but also have applicability in other health care settings where there are case managers and a need for case management leadership.

Findings/Conclusions: The business community offers leadership research and leadership development models with relevance to case management. Identifying and developing internal talent for leadership roles has been proven to be effective in preparation for advanced responsibilities, has a positive effect on staff morale, and minimizes the impact of vacant leadership positions during recruitment and onboarding activities.

Implications for Case Management Practice: Creating a case management leadership development program for an organization can be an alternative to the process of external recruitment for case management department leaders. Such a program can be undertaken even in today’s budget conscious environment by accessing existing resources in an organization in a creative and organized manner. The authors outline an approach for case management leaders to accept responsibility for succession planning and for case managers to accept responsibility for promoting their own career development through creation of a leadership development program.

Key words: effective leadership model, leadership development, succession planning.

The position of director of case management is one of the hospital leadership positions most frequently in demand—recruiting firms specializing in administrative recruitment are asked repeatedly to assist in the placement of this position. Across the country, medical centers and community hospitals alike find themselves competing for this valuable resource and conducting a national search in the process. Why is this position one of the most likely leadership positions for which organizations will employ a national search firm? As one health care recruiter noted, “there just aren’t that many good ones around.” The lack of well-qualified and effective case management leaders will continue to be an issue for organizations for years to come as there is increasing pressure to reduce cost per case as a means to manage the budget. To turn this trend around, organizations must (1) recognize that there is a shortage of qualified and effective case management leadership across the country and (2) realize that there is a sufficient return on an investment in leadership development for case management, and the time for that investment is now.

There has been much published about the nursing shortage and the aging workforce, and case management has not been immune to these trends. The last published data on case management reveals that in 2007 the average age of certified case managers was 55 years; 49% of the case managers surveyed were 51–60 years of age (Powell, 2010, pp. 301–302). While many nurses are drawn to case management later in their careers as a way to maintain patient contact and utilize their knowledge of the health care system, a large number of nurses find their way to case management because it is a job less physically demanding than bedside nursing—without having a firm understanding of what the job truly entails. In fact, many organizations move nurses to case...
management because of an individual’s physical restrictions without evaluating whether case management is a good fit for the individual’s skill set and aptitude.

Medical social workers in case management may have limited opportunities for career advancement. Factors such as differences in salary scale for nurses and social workers and the potential for, or perception of, knowledge deficit about utilization management, revenue cycle, and business aspects of hospitals make it difficult for medical social workers to rise to management positions.

It is surprising to many hospital senior leaders to learn that case management (including the roles of case manager and medical social worker) is actually a professional specialty with its own body of knowledge, including evidence-based practice, professional journals and associations, and standards of practice. Just as bedside nurses must keep current in their clinical practice, so must the case manager and medical social worker. Yet, more often than not, there are few resources offered to case management to keep current in their practice, support professional certification, or to develop leadership potential.

**Lessons From the Business Community**

Case management departments would be well served to look to the business community for models for leadership development. Business experts have examined and researched leadership development for many years, and there are many common assumptions that research has dispelled.

One of these assumptions is that it is easier to hire individuals with well-developed skill sets than to groom potential leaders. The practice of recruiting talent from outside an organization was a common philosophy for many years. There were several reasons for the popularity of this practice:

- Developing people within an organization takes time and money.

- The “stars” from another organization have a proven track record and positive reputation (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004, pp. 93–100).

However, research determined that the outcomes of this hiring practice did not always result in the expected outcome. Frequently, the star’s performance in the new organization did not match that of their previous organization. In fact, in many instances, the performance of the team that the star was brought in to lead did not match their previous performance levels.

In these studies, factors influencing these outcomes were identified. These factors included differences in systems, culture, and relationships of the hiring organization, and effect on morale and motivation of the star’s new group, especially on loyal and/or long-term employees.

General Electric’s (GE) award-winning education program at the John F. Welch Leadership Development Center in Crotonville, NY, is arguably the gold standard for employee and leadership development. Ninety percent of GE’s top 600 leaders are promoted from within and over a 15-year period and 191 of GE’s most senior executives spend at least 12 months in training and development (www.ge.com/company/leadership/index.html and www.ge.com/company/culture/leadership_learning.html). The curriculum in Crotonville includes executive courses and leadership for new managers as well as essential skills for entry-level positions. Admittedly, these achievements come at a price and the corporate website states that $1 billion is invested in employee development every year. This type of investment, even when scaled to the size of most health care organizations, may seem impossible in today’s health care environment. However, leadership development strategies may include resources already in existence in your organization and there are strategies that may not require excessive amounts of dollars and time.

**Steps to an Effective Leadership Development Model**

The following steps will help your organization develop an effective leadership model. Table 1 provides a tool that can be used to evaluate your current status.

1. **Evaluate the organization’s resources, culture, and commitment to leadership development.** In building a leadership development program, it is important to conduct a thorough evaluation of the current state of your organization. The evaluation will help to identify any existing opportunities that may be available, identify potential for additional program development, and paint a picture of the organization’s culture—an important
TABLE 1
Evaluation Tool to Develop an Effective Leadership Model

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<tr>
<th>Step Number</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Analysis and Recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Evaluate the organization’s resources, culture, and commitment to leadership development.</td>
<td>Does the organization have a practice or preference to promote from within? Where did the recently hired management staff come from? If the most recent hires were external candidates: • Were there any internal applicants? • Were any of these applicants well qualified or seriously considered for the position? • What support was offered the new managers in transitioning to their role? Is there a budget for education: academic degrees, certifications, in-services, or conferences at the organization or department level?</td>
<td>Organizations that have a practice of promoting from within may appreciate the value of leadership development. If the organizational preference is to hire external candidates, it may warrant discussion with the organization’s leadership to understand underlying factors for this preference. Organizations that support professional development may value an opportunity to support a leadership development program.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Assess the department’s status in the organization and ability of current department leadership to access or develop resources.</td>
<td>Where is the case management department on the organizational chart? Does the reporting relationship have the appropriate level of importance for the organization? Is the department highly valued with responsibilities and accountabilities understood by peers and senior leadership? Does case management leadership have a voice in strategic areas for the organization such as health plan contracting, revenue cycle meetings, etc.? If there is a budget for in-services etc. is case management staff able to access this resource?</td>
<td>Effective case management departments that are valued by an organization may reside in almost any area on the organizational chart. It is important to assess whether the current positioning of the case management department is in a segment of the organization whose operating philosophy and goals are consistent with, and support, case management values and standards of practice. If the case management department is found to be situated in a part of the organization that may operate counter to case management interests, there may be additional hurdles to overcome in developing a leadership program for case managers. Case management departments whose leader(s) also manage other departments may not be able to provide mentoring for potential case management leaders. Likewise, educational resources for case management development may also be limited.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Assess current opportunities—formal and informal—in the case management department for career growth.</td>
<td>Why did case managers leave the organization over the past year? If career advancement was a reason, what attention was given to their career development? What opportunities currently exist in the department for staff to hone leadership skills? • Is shared leadership/governance a part of the organization/department? • What opportunities exist in staff meetings for staff presentations? • How is policy and procedure development addressed? Does staff participate in this process? • Does staff understand important department metrics and how their work contributes to outcomes? Are metrics reported and reviewed with staff? • Does staff participate in the current orientation process? • Does staff participate in department projects, committee meetings, act as superusers, etc.? • Is there an opportunity to create meaningful leadership positions within the department, for example, preceptor, subject matter expert, etc.?</td>
<td>It is essential for to take an objective look at the actual opportunities that exist for aspiring case management leaders within their own department. Many times leadership development opportunities are informal, or subtle, as highlighted in the evaluation criteria at left. Presentation skills, understanding utilization, quality, and financial metrics relevant to case management, and sharing knowledge with peers serve to foster more effective case managers and provide a foundation for leadership and management skills.</td>
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TABLE 1
Evaluation Tool to Develop an Effective Leadership Model (Continued)

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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Identify staff within the department for leadership potential in the department for further development and to mentor and be mentored.</td>
<td>Who are the informal leaders and what is the nature of their influence? Who is respected by their peers and others outside of the department? Who has initiated and/or embraced change within the department/organization? How did they respond to their peers regarding the change? Who identifies opportunities for improvement and offers a possible solution? Who participates in developing solutions and implementing process improvements? Who volunteers for projects, committee work, or extra assignments within the department and/or organization?</td>
<td>Case management leaders are obligated to incorporate succession planning into their responsibilities. Identifying staff who demonstrate a positive influence on peers, act as effective liaisons for their department, and routinely seek out opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge are exhibiting characteristics that may indicate leadership potential. Case managers may identify peers who are exhibiting these potential leadership characteristics. These individuals can serve as role models for aspiring leaders.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Perform self-assessment, including modeling of desirable leadership traits, experience, and/or training gaps.</td>
<td>Do you initiate discussion with your supervisor regarding opportunities to improve performance or progress in achieving annual goals? Have you mastered the basic skills and knowledge required for your current position? What are the characteristics of a good leader? How do you compare with the five GE leadership characteristics? Who is a manager that you admire? What makes them effective? What were the career steps for leaders within your organization? How have you taken initiative within your department/organization for process and/or quality improvement? What is/has been your response to change within your role and responsibilities? When opportunities to step outside your ‘comfort zone’ arise, are you the first to volunteer? Do you actively seek feedback from peers, supervisors, and subordinates? Do you have a mentor with whom you can discuss your development?</td>
<td>It is important for any aspiring leader to master the basic skills necessary in their current role. There are many case management books that outline the knowledge a case manager must master to be proficient in his/her role. The Case Management Society of America Core Curriculum for Case Management provides an outline of such content (Powell &amp; Tahan, 2008). Other resources include The Case Manager’s Survival Guide (Cesta &amp; Tahan, 2002) and Case Management: A Practical Guide for Education and Practice (Powell &amp; Tahan, 2010).</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Develop an integrated plan that incorporates all resources, tools, and strategies currently available including a senior leadership sponsor or champion for leadership development in case management.</td>
<td>Review data from the assessments. Identify potential barriers, including budgeting. Identify potential opportunities, including little or no cost initiatives, for example, manager shadowing, shared leadership, etc. Determine need for a sponsor or champion from the leadership team. Create a personal development plan.</td>
<td>Utilize the information obtained from the previous steps to develop a comprehensive analysis that includes potential barriers to a case management leadership development program. The analysis should include potential barriers identified in the organization and the department and strategies to overcome them. A leadership development program for case management should incorporate all of the existing opportunities within the organization and how they may be utilized in a more coordinated manner. At the very least, aspiring leaders should create their own development plan that takes advantage of all of the resources available to them.</td>
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access or develop resources. Department status in an organization may determine the ease with which a leadership development program will receive resources in terms of dollars and time, and the priority that program development will receive. If it is determined that the case management department is not valued or well understood in the organization, this may need to be addressed before presenting the leadership development proposal. Or, depending on the culture of the organization, lack of status may be a reason to implement a leadership development program and help to support your case.

3. Assess current opportunities, formal and informal, in the case management department for career growth. It is not uncommon for staff seeking leadership development to become discouraged about lack of formal opportunity to develop leadership skills. A formal program may not exist; however, opportunities abound in any case management department. Future leaders want to be recognized but need opportunities to stand up and be counted. Staff should be afforded opportunities to get involved in work groups or committees in the department. Is there an ongoing problem waiting to be solved? Approach staff and organize a task force to address the issue. Involve staff in the annual review and revision of department protocols, policies, and procedures. Ask individuals to present a case study in rounds or a staff meeting to develop presentation skills. Encourage staff to become a subject matter expert; have them present an in-service or “brown bag” to case management staff and the health care team. Make a list of potential opportunities to learn and grow. Case managers aspiring to become leaders can take the initiative to offer to lead or participate in work groups, present topics of interest at a staff meetings or other venues, or assist their manager in department activities related to quality improvement and policies and procedures development.

Simple activities (e.g., circulating or posting articles) send a message to staff that there is concern for their development and help to build a culture of learning. The challenge for current leaders is the same as for aspiring leaders: look for small opportunities to begin developing skills, and these small opportunities will inevitably develop into valuable tools and strategies.

4. Identify staff within the department with leadership potential for further development and to mentor and be mentored. Identifying case managers who have leadership and management potential, and who have career aspirations to become a manager, is a critical step in the process. The cost of repeatedly recruiting, hiring, and training talented staff should be measured against the cost of a well-designed leadership development program. Organizations won’t invest resources unless there is an understanding of the value of the investment. In addition to the recruitment costs, case management departments that have had frequent leadership turnover or leadership positions that have been open for considerable periods of time are less likely to be as productive or as effective in carrying out their organizational responsibilities.

5. Perform a self-assessment, including modeling of desirable leadership traits, experience, and/or training gaps. GE identified five leadership traits as necessary for innovating and creating new businesses; these traits have relevance to case managers and case management leaders in the ever-changing world of health care (Prokesch, 2009, p. 7). The five traits are:

- External focus: Defines success through the customer’s eyes and is tuned with industry dynamics. Case managers with external focus will not only be patient advocates but will work collaboratively with physicians and the health care team. In addition, external focus will require an awareness of the rapidly changing health care environment and the impact on case management.
- Clear thinker: Seeks simple solutions to complex problems; is decisive and focused; communicates clear and consistent priorities. Case managers who are clear thinkers can anticipate barriers and develop alternate priorities proactively. Clear thinkers communicate succinctly and interact with patients, peers, and the health care team respectfully, professionally, and at the appropriate level.
- Imagination: Generates new and creative ideas; is resourceful and open to change. Case managers with imagination are able to see the opportunities in seemingly hopeless situations. They leave no stone unturned in seeking out solutions to challenges they encounter in their practice, from establishing positive relationships with key stakeholders, to difficult discharge planning issues.
- Inclusiveness: Is a team player; respects others’ ideas and contributions; creates excitement, drives engagement, builds loyalty and commitment. Inclusive case managers recognize their limitations and seek input from others’ expertise.
Leadership development begins in orientation. Develop a training program with current staff to act as preceptors for new staff. Include information relevant to leadership development—opportunities in the department and throughout the organization—in orientation for new staff. Identify projects, presentations, committee membership, and so forth, in which staff can participate and that will aid in leadership development.

**Strategies for Case Management Leadership Development**

If we are to develop more “good ones” in case management leadership, that responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of current case management leadership. Jack Welch, the former CEO of GE, states in his book *Winning*: “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.” If you are a case management leader, you are in the best position to make the case for a leadership development program in your organization and to begin implementation of simple strategies for leadership development now. Ensuring adequate political capital within an organization will help to further implementation of a leadership development program as well as other initiatives benefiting the department.

Making the case for leadership development will require knowledge of the organization’s goals and market strategy. The proposed leadership development program must fit the organizational culture and clearly support the organization’s short-term and long-term goals. The culture of an organization will be reflected in its practices, values, attitudes, and general characteristics. Organizations that provide opportunities for staff to participate in decision making and support professional development through tuition reimbursement or other programs may be more likely to support a leadership development program.

Consider the short-term and long-term goals for your organization. For example, organizations aspiring for clinical integration or to become an accountable care organization will require case management expertise in multiple venues across the continuum—potentially in areas where case managers may not currently exist. Coordination of care between case managers in the hospital, community, and health

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- Expertise: Has in-depth knowledge and credibility built on experience; continuously develops self; loves learning.

Case managers aspiring to leadership are life-long learners. They are equally as willing to share their knowledge and learn from others. Reviewing the job descriptions for leadership positions in case management will assist in charting the course. Identifying formal educational requirements for career advancement as well as the intangible qualities will help define what the organization values in its leaders. Advanced degrees will enhance a leader’s credibility and contribute immeasurably to professional growth and development. Individuals who offer solutions to identified issues, embrace change in a positive manner, and work collaboratively with others within the department and throughout the organization demonstrate some of these traits. These individuals have the potential to become future leaders in case management. If you are currently a leader in case management, how does your performance match these traits? What can you do to improve?

6. **Develop an integrated program plan that incorporates all resources, tools, and strategies currently available and the tools and strategies that need to be developed. Include a senior leadership sponsor or champion for leadership development in case management if available and/or necessary.** A leadership development program should take advantage of all formal resources currently available in the organization through human resources or organizational development departments, including reimbursement for education and certification. Such resources may also include classroom activities, as well as mentoring programs, shared leadership/governance, or programs such as shadowing staff from other departments. Identification of a sponsor or champion, for a case management leadership development program may be an effective strategy to promote the project. Such an individual should have a leadership position, be well-respected within the organization, and, if possible, have demonstrated success in program implementation. This individual can provide insight and guidance in conducting an organizational assessment and analysis, assist in navigating internal politics, and act as a spokesperson and advocate for a leadership development program.

If these activities do not exist in your organization, why not propose them? Suggest that leaders in the organization provide sessions to staff to discuss leadership topics. If you are a case management leader, offer to lead the first session. Speak with leaders in other departments throughout the organization to see what types of leadership development activities they are engaged in, or recruit your peers to develop an interdepartmental plan.

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### Phase Criteria to Consider

**Program planning phase**
- Does the organization clearly understand the value of case management or is education necessary?
- Does the plan clearly support organizational goals and market strategy?
- Does the plan fit the organizational culture?
- Does the plan take advantage of all existing leadership development resources currently available in the organization?
- Does the plan include creative approaches to leadership development, for example, subject matter experts, super-users, etc.?
- Who will be responsible for communicating the plan and benefits to the organization?
- Are key stakeholders in the organization (nursing, finance) providing feedback and/or involved in program development?
- Is a senior leader available and interested in acting as a champion for the program? Or is a steering committee a more appropriate approach?
- Who will oversee activities or decide on expenditure of resources?

**Program execution phase**
- Is there a focus on opportunities, not problems and barriers?
- Is department staff engaged in the program?
- Are the department’s potential leaders adequately involved in leading activities?
- Is there a communication strategy regarding program outcomes for case management staff? For organization leaders?

**Personal development plan**
- Perform a self-assessment; use the GE leadership traits or other resource to take stock of strengths and opportunities for development. What skills or case management knowledge do you need to acquire to advance your career? If leadership positions in your organization require advanced degrees, develop a plan for obtaining the necessary credentials.
- Schedule time to discuss the results of your self-assessment and your career goals with your manager.
- Develop your personal plan based on your assessment and discussions with your manager.
- Identify a leadership mentor.
- Look for opportunities to learn and grow every day. Ask clarifying questions, listen carefully to the answers, and incorporate new learning into your daily work and decision making.

### TABLE 2
Leadership Development Program Checklist

<table>
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Plans will open up new leadership opportunities and new areas of expertise in case management. Capable leadership is required to develop new programs and implement change. Consistently prove to your organization that case management is a critical link between its clinical care and financial health through use of appropriate metrics and reporting strategies.

Organizations with a goal of reducing attrition and improving staff retention will likely be receptive to supporting a leadership development program. Table 2 provides a checklist of criteria to consider while developing and implementing a leadership development program.

Managers in case management have opportunities to begin leadership development activities now. Identify potential leaders and discuss a career path with them. This discussion is generally a part of the annual review process but should not wait until then. The subject of career goals can be broached during rounding or shadowing activities or by simply making an appointment to discuss the topic with staff. Managers must support staff in self-assessment and in developing a meaningful plan to address their aspirations and development needs. Opportunities for staff to hone leadership skills in the case management department can include staff serving as superusers/staff resource for technology infrastructure (electronic medical record, on-line utilization management criteria, and so forth), or subject matter experts in a particular clinical or functional area.

Case managers do not need to feel powerless in their career development. Identify leaders that you admire and identify the characteristics that make them effective. Seize opportunities to develop these characteristics in yourself. And finally, envision yourself as part of a leadership succession plan for your department: What will you need to learn and grow and eventually develop into an effective case management leader?

### REFERENCES


Kathleen Miodonski, RN, BSN, CMAC, is a manager at The Camden Group, with over 16 years of leadership experience in case management and utilization management in hospitals and health plans. She has successfully led case management departments through model redesign and implementation and has extensive expertise in operations, managed care, and disease/utilization/case management.

Patricia Hines, PhD, RN, is a vice president at The Camden Group, with a clinical operations background. Her expertise includes case management and care delivery models for clinical integration, nursing practice and strategic planning, critical care/emergency department and patient throughout, and joint commission preparation. She has more than 30 years of health care experience.


