

## LEADERSHIP

## New Foundations for Future Success

*Jeffrey C. Bauer, PhD*

Judging from titles of best-sellers in the business section of a good book store, leadership is a subject with staying power. Studies of leaders or leadership always seem to be on the top ten list, emphasizing the qualities of executives who presumably have the “right stuff” to move a business forward to the next stage of development.

Authors of leadership books may be good at identifying leaders at a given point in time, but they have not been uniformly good futurists. Many leaders who were lionized in literature as recently as a year ago are now discredited. High-tech companies that were leading the way in early 2001 are now in bankruptcy. Obviously, universal truths are not to be found in all writings about leadership.

One of my long-time favorite authors on leadership in information technology, Harlan Cleveland, has avoided this trap by studying general characteristics of success over many years. Not one to be seduced by hyperbole, he has recently distilled his thoughts into an excellent little book, *Leadership and the Information Revolution* (World Academy of Art and Science, 1997). In it, he provides wise advice for those of us who dare call ourselves futurists: “We can’t know for sure what will happen, [but] we can already make a good guess about something more important, why it will happen.”

In that spirit, I take the opportunity of this column to share my thoughts on five key leadership characteristics that will likely make a positive difference in the evolution of information technology in healthcare over the coming years. Aspiring leaders should consider nurturing these attributes because, according to my crystal ball, they are fundamental

reasons why IT will change healthcare for the better.

First, the people who purposefully move IT forward will be problem solvers. They will be good at defining problems first and identifying solutions second. This success factor is different from simply understanding technology and knowing what it can do. Real progress comes from selecting appropriate technology to solve clearly defined problems. Too many individuals and organizations have been prematurely recognized as leaders because they were among the

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first to adopt a new technology, but experience soon showed that it did not solve any problems. Indeed, adopting a technology unrelated to a carefully delineated problem has often created far more problems than it has solved. Tomorrow’s IT leaders in healthcare will know how to define problems and how to select technologies that solve them, applying their skills in that order.

Second, the IT leader of the future will be a teacher. He or she will be adept at translating technical concepts into practical terms for non-technical colleagues with problems to solve.

The leader will know enough about appropriate technologies and users’ needs to be able to tell users what they need to know in their own language. Understanding the difference between simplification and oversimplification will be an important measure of this teaching function. Healthcare’s IT leaders will be good at telling the vast majority of users everything they need to know, while going offline for additional explanations to the small number of users with advanced technical interests. Good writing and graphics capabilities will be important components of successful teaching. Leaders will need to develop these communications skills if they do not already possess them. They will also be skilled at transitioning their “students” from traditional print materials to electronic media over the course of the learning experience.

Third, effective leaders will work to reshape the sales and product development strategies of companies that sell IT to healthcare providers. I’ve known more than a few IT executives who understood a problem and knew a technologically viable solution to it, but vendors did not offer a responsive product. Indeed, vendors were often promoting products based on old technologies (e.g., closed systems architecture) rather than developing appropriate new technologies (e.g., Internet-enabled applications) that met providers’ real needs. Some leaders will move us forward by taking a tough, remedial stand with vendors, helping the sellers understand how to redirect their strategies in order to get business. Gain/risk sharing agreements and joint ventures are results of this type of leadership.

Fourth, leaders who move us to a good future will have broad,

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multidimensional values. They will recognize and understand the many different measures of IT's contributions to healthcare. In particular, they will be able to look beyond traditional return on investment (ROI) to technology's other potential contributions to healthcare — intangible values such as patient safety, consumer involvement, and expanded access.

These leaders will negotiate desirable balance within the delivery system by ensuring that some technologies are implemented not because they cut costs (i.e., make money), but because they improve the health of the population being served. Leaders will successfully identify and defend the cross-subsidies needed to ensure access and to improve quality.

Fifth, IT leaders who make a positive, enduring difference will be involved in politics. They will go relentlessly before lawmakers and regulators with constructive criticism of the incongruous business environment of healthcare in the early 21st century. They will show why desirable investments in IT are impossible in the era of vindictive reimbursement policy (e.g., the Balanced Budget Act of 1997) and unfunded mandates (e.g., HIPAA).

They will also be armed with hard data and concrete plans that show how healthcare providers could improve cost, quality, and access if they had resources to invest in appropriate IT. Last, but not least, they will enlist the general public and the business community in the cause because politicians are ultimately swayed by public opinion and special interests, not common sense.

Consistent with the purpose of this column, these five characteristics of IT leadership in healthcare are admittedly futuristic. However, they are not unrealistic. I know many IT executives who are already applying one or more of them in daily practice, and these leaders are making a positive difference in their organizations and in the markets

they serve. Their ranks will grow, and IT will transform healthcare as leadership moves in new and different directions. Some day soon, I should even be able to write a book about it.

**About the Author**

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