

How to Reach the C-Suite

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By Mary Butler

In order for health information management (HIM) professionals to be successful in their organizations—from starting an information governance program to getting ICD-10-CM/PCS implemented on time—support from the C-suite is crucial. As HIM departments undertake increasingly expansive technology projects, the best way to get executive buy-in isn't just by being on friendly terms with healthcare leaders, it's achieved by being a leader.

Good HIM professionals, by their nature, must foster good relationships with individuals throughout an organization. Their jobs require them to interact with clinical staff for initiatives such as clinical documentation improvement, as well as with the folks in the business office staff who need to understand the newly complex role of quality and reimbursement.

Rocketing up the corporate ladder from HIM to the C-suite requires a strong educational background, competence in multiple HIM domains, and confidence.

Rebekah Mussman, MLS, RHIA, FHFMA, president and CEO of the Crete Area Medical Center in Crete, NE, started her career as the director of HIM at a critical access hospital in a rural part of her state. Although she had always aspired to be a CEO, she's glad that she went the HIM route to get there rather than, for example, starting her career with a business degree and a job in management.

By starting out in HIM, “You get in the weeds of what's required in the record, what's required in the documentation, but then you also get the business aspect of it. You learn statistics, some of which you can transfer into finance. You understand the big picture and I think a lot of healthcare, in the C-suite, is about relationships and I think it's important,” Mussman explained.

The Climb to the Top

Mussman says that many of her opportunities for advancement stem from the fact that she works in rural health—a setting she was familiar with because she's only ever lived and worked in rural areas. Working in critical access hospitals has allowed her to “wear a lot of hats,” whereas starting out in the HIM department of a much larger health system wouldn't afford as many opportunities to work in—or with—other departments. She was a year out of college with her bachelor's degree when she was offered a director of HIM role at the Harlan County Health System in Alma, NE. In this job, Mussman worked one-on-one with the business manager to improve the facility's accounts receivable days and was so successful that she was offered the business manager's job when he left. HIM and the business office were then combined as a department, and Mussman had oversight over the new department.

Mussman started working on her master's degree while working at Harlan County, and earned her degree in organizational leadership. With her new degree and a desire to keep exploring, she accepted a CFO position at a new hospital before eventually landing as CEO at Crete Area Medical Center.

“My ultimate goal was to be a CEO, but it was important that I went the track I did because I learned a ton,” she notes. “When I started as director of HIM, I was also the privacy officer and was involved with quality, and so I got to know nursing staff and built those relationships. When I went to County Health Services, I was the compliance officer and I did security. The HIM background was essential in a lot of those things,” Mussman said.

She says that advanced education has played a major role in her career advancement and she encourages others in HIM to pursue education beyond the baccalaureate level. To make it to the C-suite in today's healthcare environment, a master's-level degree is practically a requirement.

“But you also have to understand not all academic transfers into the real world,” she cautions. “... I’m a huge proponent of education but I think it’s important to get some real work experience.”

HIM in the Hot Seat

Having a person with a HIM background in senior leadership almost guarantees that issues near and dear to a facility’s HIM department will be given more prominent consideration by the rest of the C-suite. This is not only a benefit to the organization, but also to HIM as a career path and as a profession.

Mussman says that in her time as a CEO (she’s been in her current position for four months), she has reminded colleagues of the merits of engaging HIM in business operations.

“I’m probably biased because I realize the potential and the wealth of knowledge they [HIM] bring to the table. I just told our interim CFO, ‘You have an excellent HIM director—that is gold. I can’t tell you how important that is. Without that, things will start to crumble.’ I just can’t praise her enough. I’m looking forward to the things she can do.”

Having strong communication skills and a personable attitude is invaluable in C-suite roles, Mussman says.

“People skills are huge. You communicate with your team, with your peers, physicians, with boards, it is all different. You have different audiences, and especially in a hospital this size, we have 10 or 11 medical staff that I have to have close relationships with and they’re all different, and they all have different issues, and different hot buttons,” Mussman notes.

Mossman says HIM professionals who aspire to the C-suite already have the core skill set. Another key is to never turn down an opportunity to learn a new task or skill, or a new responsibility.

“I never said ‘no’ to anything. If somebody asked if I wanted to be on a task force I said yes... That’s been my experience—immersing myself in whatever I can to learn and be involved, and not be bored.”

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