

# Taking Your Seat (at the Head of the Table): How to Become a Leader and Decision-Maker in Healthcare

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By Lisa A. Eramo

Leaders are innovative, strategic, and collaborative. Leaders are confident and creative problem solvers. They've worked hard to hone their knowledge and earn the respect of others. Leaders are known for their subject matter expertise, as well as their business savvy.

In healthcare, leadership opportunities for HIM professionals abound. As healthcare changes and evolves commensurate with technology, HIM professionals must be able to rise to the top within their organizations and advocate for privacy, security, data integrity, and more. However, even the most knowledgeable and confident HIM professionals sometimes feel overlooked, and perhaps even ignored, when important initiatives are launched. Just why this happens to such a talented group of professionals—not getting a seat at the proverbial decision-making table—is not just due to chance.

Experts say one reason could be that HIM as a profession is undergoing an identity transformation. Professionals and the facilities in which they work don't always know how HIM fits into the larger picture as both a process and function. The profession has become more technology-driven and de-centralized, touching nearly every department within an organization and in some places moving outside the traditional centralized "HIM department."

The challenge for HIM professionals to move into leadership roles has been present for decades, and something that experts say must be addressed directly if HIM professionals want to remain relevant in healthcare and see long-lasting change. Professionals need to leave their comfort zones and embrace the new HIM leadership identity, industry experts say.

## A New and Emerging Identity

The HIM profession has adapted to the point that its interests, particularly privacy and security and data management, must be represented when major decisions are made at healthcare organizations—or else. "Our profession is changing, and our identity is changing. I think traditional HIM has evolved," says Victoria Weaver, assistant vice president of clinical data management at Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), based in Nashville, TN. "We've had this call for active leadership for quite some time, and I think some of our colleagues are choosing to accept the challenge, and some of our colleagues are choosing not to."

However, HIM professionals who will be successful in the long-term are those who look beyond traditional HIM functions of coding and documentation, says Andretta Reed, MHA, RHIA, assistant vice president of HIM operations and coding at Capella Healthcare, based in Franklin, TN. Today's HIM leaders should be involved in choosing and designing electronic health record (EHR) systems, developing compliance policies and procedures, launching population health monitoring programs, implementing patient portals, purchasing new equipment, integrating personal health devices, and more, Reed says.

"Any time that you're looking at a service line or product that affects documentation or quality of care, HIM does need to be at the table to have these discussions," she says.

Major decisions can't always come down to what is best for just physicians. "Some of these purchasing and operational decisions are made based on the best workflow for the clinician, but HIM needs to incorporate standard requirements for good documentation," Weaver says.

HIM professionals should also play a key role in acquisition decisions—that is, the decisions to purchase other facilities or physician practices. Reed says organizations must defer to HIM to answer questions such as "Do the other organization's charts meet compliance standards?" and "How does the other organization fit into the acquiring organization's mission and goals?" These questions will be incredibly important as accountable care organizations, which allow different healthcare

entities to partner in the care of patients in order to reduce costs, continue to grow and providers become more consolidated as part of larger healthcare systems.

Given their expertise there's no reason why HIM professionals shouldn't function at the top level in today's healthcare organizations, says Leslie Fox, MA, RHIA, CEO of Care Communications, based in Chicago, IL. "In order to really be able to influence more strategic decisions, you need to work alongside the other C-suite professionals," she says. "Every organization should have a chief information management officer [CIMO]. I think it's time." Fox says HIM professionals need to step up and into this CIMO role as data becomes more important in healthcare.

Still, experts agree that being a strong leader doesn't necessarily mean that one must serve in a specific leadership role such as vice president, president, or even CIMO. "You can be a leader without being in a leadership position," Weaver says. "You can be a subject matter expert and someone who other people can rely on."

HIM subject matter expertise is just as important as being able to demonstrate strategic alignment to the business of healthcare, says Sean Stowers, director of learning services at Pearson Learning Solutions. AHIMA is working with Pearson Learning Solutions to develop a series of leadership courses that aim to advance the careers of HIM professionals.

The courses will focus on faculty development, which educational professionals can use to help develop curriculum and create a motivating environment; business and career courses, which focus on business functions, career success, and critical thinking; workforce education courses, which focus on areas like communication, innovation, and accountability; and workplace learning courses in areas like leadership, negotiation, managing teams, and coaching. "The more that HIM professionals can embrace the idea that the sanctity of the data has meaning for the healthcare organization or the payer, the more they'll be able to adopt that strategic mindset," Stowers says.

HIM professionals have much to learn from other professions that have already undergone similar transformations and tread the path to leadership, says Stowers. "If you look at the rise of the IT initiative and the time when IT really became the imperative, you're really talking about Y2K," he says. "That was the late '90s when there were big massive systems changes." Stowers says IT professionals moved into the spotlight because they possessed the technical knowledge necessary to achieve this major conversion. HIM can learn from this experience and use the healthcare data revolution to achieve greater recognition as well.

"In the late '80s, organizations didn't even have an IT department," says Doug Harward, CEO of Training Industry, Inc. "Now, in many organizations and companies the chief technology officer or chief information officer is one of the most powerful functional leaders."

Ironically, there is often tension between IT and HIM. This tension sometimes results in the omission of HIM from certain conversations or initiatives, Reed says. Consider the federal government's "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program. Although IT can implement the technical requirements for meaningful use, the act of reporting and releasing data out of the EHR to meet the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services program requirements falls under HIM's domain. HIM professionals must advocate for the value that they bring to the table and learn to work together with IT as well as all departments within the organization, Reed says.

It's important to acknowledge that being a leader doesn't also necessarily equate to serving on a specific committee or attending a specific meeting, Fox says. "It's about being present in the organization all the time engaging in conversations," she says. "You have to have a voice, but it's up to you to have that voice and to make your voice heard."

Fox says that in many organizations, decisions are made long before the actual meeting in which they're formalized. HIM professionals must be involved in these discussions from the beginning, she adds.

## Strategies for Leadership Success

In today's healthcare environment there are many opportunities for HIM professionals to step into leadership roles. Doing so, however, takes both time and ongoing effort. There is no magic formula for how to become a great leader, Harward says. "There's a fundamental question that has been, is now, and will continue to be at the heart and soul of leadership development, and that is, 'Can you teach people to lead or must they be natural leaders, and then you can hatch their abilities?'"

This question remains largely unanswered. However, experts agree that there are definite steps that HIM professionals can take to advocate for themselves and their profession. By doing so, they'll likely begin to be perceived by others as a leader and soon follow by doing leadership-oriented work.

## Tips for Becoming a Good Leader

Consider the following strategies for becoming a good leader:

- **Know your organization.** Understand who the decision-makers are within the organization. Who holds the power? What is the internal process for making important decisions? HIM professionals must be able to answer these questions if they want to move into leadership roles, Fox says.
- **Strategically align with hospital executives.** "If someone isn't helping you navigate the waters of your facility, you're not going to be successful," Weaver adds.
- **Identify your organization's specific pain points.** Superb leaders know how to address pain points in a highly articulate and efficient manner. For some organizations, the pain point is the conversion to ICD-10-CM/PCS. For others, it's meaningful use, or an EHR implementation, or a whole host of other initiatives going on in healthcare today. HIM professionals must scope out the pain point and then identify specific ways in which they can contribute to solving that pain point, Weaver says.
- **Identify these pain points by having direct and open conversations with hospital executives.** HIM professionals can ask their CEO to identify the organization's short-term and long-term visions and goals and then brainstorm ways in which they can help meet these goals, Fox says.

## Add Value to the Organization

Being a leader should not be solely a selfish act. "It's not 'How do I get myself, personally, at the table?' but rather 'What does the organization need, and can I meet that need?' That's what people need to ask themselves," Fox says. "The HIM professional who is consistently envisioning how health information will transform their organization and who informally explores ideas with their colleagues every day... will have influence. HIM professionals will be at the table when they regularly demonstrate their knowledge not only of HIM but of the entire organization."

As healthcare data becomes increasingly more important, HIM professionals need to think about how this data can be used to solve actual problems within the organization.

"Everything is about data and the patient," Weaver says. "I find it hard to believe that most of the business problems that we face within our hospitals today don't correlate at some level to this. It's about figuring out how HIM professionals can add value to the problem-solving."

Adding value may simply be a matter of looking at a particular problem objectively. It could also mean ensuring that executives have all of the data that's necessary to make a good decision or that they understand how and by whom that data was compiled.

"If they don't have the information, this is a role that HIM can fill," Fox says. "Do some research and offer up the information." HIM professionals need to be viewed by others not only as the custodian of the patient's health record but also a research and data guru—someone who can solve problems, ask good questions, and interpret the data, she adds.

## Seek Opportunities, Don't Wait for Them

There are always opportunities to share information, Reed says. When HIM professionals share information, others naturally begin to perceive them as leaders.

"One must be present and accounted for every day—not as a heads down operations manager but as a strategic thinker—someone who is constantly scanning the environment for opportunities and threats. That's what a leader does," Fox says.

For example, consider drafting a brief weekly newsletter for other staff members that includes information about important regulations that affect strategic goals and initiatives. E-mail relevant articles to members of the C-suite regularly. Ensure that

others, including the C-suite, understand the important—and evolving—role of HIM, Reed says.

## **Build Relationships with Non-HIMers**

Take every opportunity to converse with colleagues and ask open-ended questions such as “What are the challenges you face on a daily basis?”; “How are things going in your department?”; and “How is your profession changing?”

“Leaders must engage with other people all the time in a way that inspires them to function at a higher level,” Fox says.

These conversations can be short but meaningful. Not only does this help identify potential pain points with which HIM professionals can assist, but it helps earn the respect of others. Leaders need to have the emotional maturity to ask thoughtful questions, listen, and observe, Fox says.

“Sometimes a healthy dose of self-awareness and organizational-savvy is the price of admission [to the decision-making table],” Stowers says.

Fox agrees, saying HIM professionals should ask if they can “see yourself as others see you,” she says. “If you stay in your own area, you will never be perceived as a strategic leader in the larger organization. You have to get out, get to know people, and contribute to discussions about the strategic issues of the day.”

## **Network Outside of Your Own Organization**

Not only does networking outside of one’s own facility and health system provide a glimpse into innovative strategies from which your own organization could benefit, it also helps develop contacts who can provide advice and expertise, Fox says.

For example, contact other organizations to determine how they are addressing patient portals, telemedicine, or ICD-10-CM/PCS. Try to identify the larger environmental factors that could affect your organization. What is your region doing to implement health information exchange? What are the accountable care organizations that exist in your region, and how are they functioning?

## **Never Stop Learning**

Although a two- or four-year degree will get your foot in the leadership door, HIM professionals will likely need higher education (i.e., a master’s degree in business, healthcare administration, health informatics, or clinical informatics) if they intend to move into leadership roles, Reed says.

Aside from formal education, true HIM leaders must always be on the lookout for learning opportunities—many of which are regularly provided by AHIMA. “The idea of being a lifelong learner of your profession is something that cannot be underestimated,” Stowers says. “I think it’s one of the crucial elements of setting yourself on the pathway to changing your profession.”

The most powerful leaders demonstrate a constant thirst for knowledge, Harward says. “Great leaders and students will tell you that the more they know, the more they realize they don’t know,” he says.

## **Constant Change a Reality**

In healthcare there will always be new regulations, new technologies, and new codes. The cliché that “the only constant is change” couldn’t be truer for today’s healthcare providers. Those HIM professionals who take the initiative to read regulations, ask questions, and share information will be viewed by others as leaders.

“We live in a world that’s constantly changing, and we each need to be responsible for our own learning,” Fox says. “If we really want to be a part of leading the organization, we have to broaden our perspective beyond HIM in terms of our knowledge of the healthcare industry and our own organization.”

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