

Ten Skills That Make a Great Leader

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Jobs in the health information management (HIM) profession are becoming increasingly advanced in the need for both technical expertise and leadership skills. This shift is particularly important to recognize as HIM professionals navigate new career opportunities and changes ahead. Strong leaders are needed in the profession to help guide and shape the future of HIM.

But what leadership skills have helped HIM leaders succeed in the past? How does education and volunteerism support leadership development? These questions were asked of several HIM executive and director leaders at the 2014 AHIMA Annual Convention and Exhibit in San Diego, CA. The insights gained from that discussion provide the following picture of what skills are critically important in these changing times.

Ten Important Leadership Skills

At the convention, 18 HIM leaders shared their perspectives on the leadership characteristics and skills that most strongly contributed to their success and led to professional recognition in their organization. Two focus groups were held—one with HIM executives and one with HIM directors—and their responses analyzed to identify themes in their advancement.

Leadership is strongly represented in the HIM professional body of knowledge. The concept of leadership encompasses a broad swath of opportunities open to HIM professionals. Not unlike other fields of practice, the HIM skill set is undergirded by a foundation of necessary skills that can propel qualified individuals to the highest level of recognition within a variety of organizations.

The focus group participants believed that the following 10 leadership skills are critical to their success:

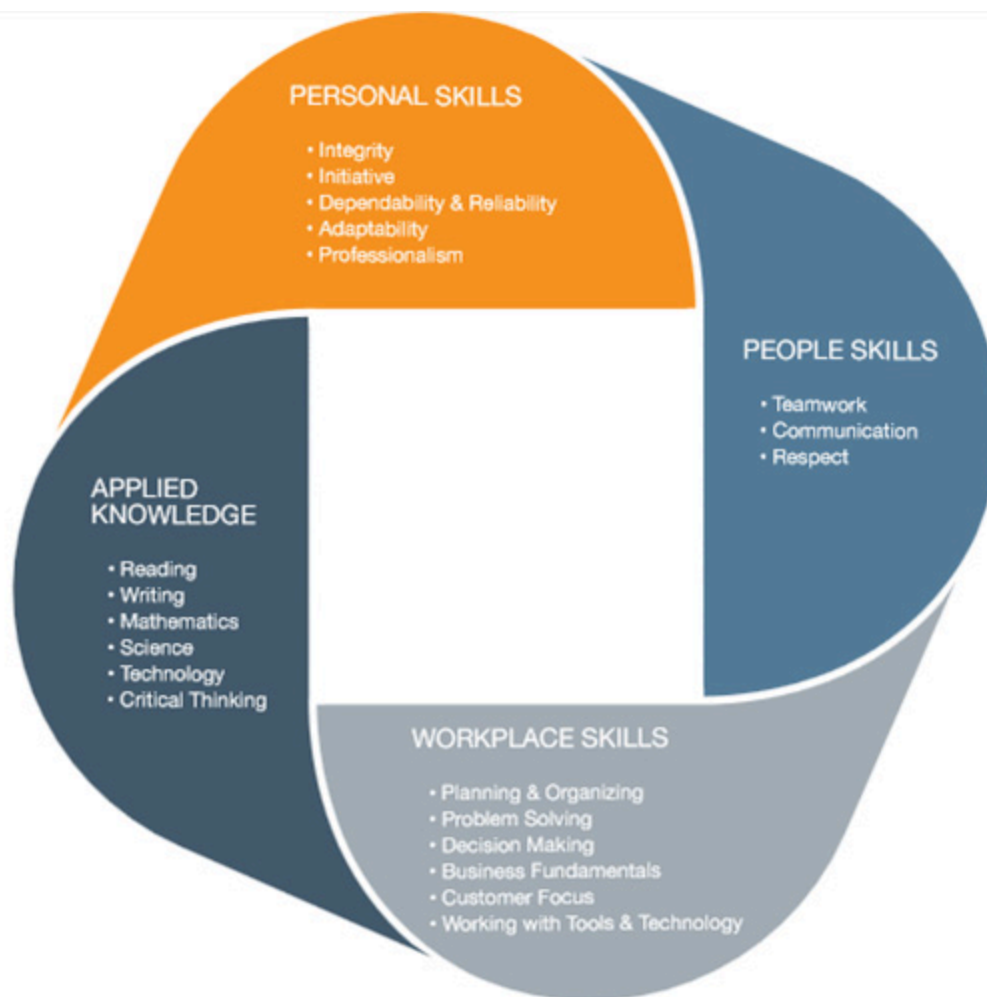
- **Confidence and Courage:** Believe in yourself and your convictions; have the strength to assert yourself and push forward when you believe in something. Leaders need to have “executive presence.”
- **Desire to Achieve:** The drive to succeed, meet goals, get things done, and achieve results.
- **Vision:** The ability to see the whole picture, including what the future will look like. From that big picture, the ability to set future direction and strategy, understand what is happening in the current environment, determine how to get to a future state, and motivate others to follow.
- **Innovation:** Become an intuitive thinker who looks for better ways and is not constrained by the past (or current) practice.
- **Flexibility:** Creativity and the ability to adapt and accept change. Not only has a plan B, but also a plan C.
- **Integrity:** Being a trusted leader, someone people want to follow and believe in their direction. Loyalty and honesty are important.
- **Collaborative Skills:** Diplomatic and able to form relationships. Considers self a facilitator and part of the team. Ability to put self in others’ shoes. Ability to delegate and develop a team.
- **Communication Skills:** Although already a common employability skill (see Figure 1 below), strong communication ability is critical for a leader. This is the ability to provide clear direction and effectively write, speak, and listen.
- **Knowledge:** Has recognized expertise and technical skills, and surrounds self with knowledgeable people.
- **Life-long Learner:** Never stops learning—has an interest and desire to continually gain new skills, knowledge, and education.

There are multiple avenues a person can take to develop their leadership skills. One of them is to conduct a self-assessment of the 10 previously discussed leadership skills and determine personal areas of growth and development. Another is to identify good role models in your organization. They can help identify the characteristics that are valued. Seek a mentor that can guide

and offer advice in your leadership growth. Also, take advantage of leadership development programs offered in the work place. In addition to these steps, one can also seek ongoing formal education and volunteer roles to build skills.

Figure 1: Common Employability Skills

These employability skills are interconnected to allow employers to look at the full scope of what skills are necessary in all major economic sectors. Together, attainment of these business-defined skills prepares individuals for careers and for further education and training.



Source: National Network of Business and Industry Associations. "Common Employability Skills." July 22, 2014. http://businessroundtable.org/sites/default/files/Common%20Employability_asingle_fm.pdf.

Leadership and Education Intertwined

The HIM leaders in the focus groups recognized the importance of continuing their formal education to advance their career not only to gain knowledge and technical skills, but to understand how to act like a professional, work as a team, think strategically, and improve communication skills.

A strong academic foundation provides a core set of competencies for HIM leaders. As noted in the 10 leadership skills, many are considered "soft skills" (integrity, collaboration, problem solving, work ethic). The National Network of Business and Industry Associations identified a core set of fundamental skills and competencies for leadership. Figure 1 on above illustrates these common employability skills categorized in four areas: personal skills, people skills, workplace skills, and applied knowledge. Attainment of these business-defined skills can prepare an individual for both career and educational goals.

One Member's Path to Leadership

Jannifer Owens, MSA, BSHA, CCS, CPC, CIRCC, senior HIM coding director at Banner Health and a leadership roundtable participant, began working in HIM 18 years ago, with the majority of that time working in coding. She began seeking leadership roles around 2006 and has worked in a variety of positions since then. In November of 2010, she began working for Banner Health and, during that time, moved from a senior coding manager to acute care coding director and, finally, to senior coding director.

Owens practices lifelong learning by pursuing higher education and obtaining relevant credentials, including a bachelor's degree in healthcare administration, a master's degree in accounting, and several coding certifications.

The leadership skills that Owens uses most successfully have been building relationships and executive presence. "Building relationships is important to ensure that others realize your value," Owens says. Accountability, trust, and respect are imperative in building strong relationships between a leader and their peers or a leader and their staff. From an executive presence perspective a suitable level of confidence and intelligence should be expressed, one should communicate clearly and appropriately, and composure must be maintained during difficult situations. "Through the application of these and a few other techniques, I have been able to successfully obtain increasingly higher job levels," Owens says.

Additionally, a key leadership skill of Owens is effective collaboration with her staff of around 200 people. "We work in a team environment and use each other's skills to create and finalize decisions," Owens says. In addition, she fosters trust between team members, which has led to the ability to maintain goals and provide increased job satisfaction.

Owens has also volunteered nationally and on the state level in appointed and elected positions. This year she was elected as the treasurer-elect of her state HIM association. She also volunteers within her organization—for example, with other groups on system initiatives. Owens is displaying her leadership skills across the system. "I really feel like a great leader is one who is easily approachable, sincere, and humble, while still demonstrating confidence, knowledge, and composure," she says.

Relationship Between Volunteerism and Leadership

Volunteerism and leadership go hand in hand—either by supporting the development of leadership skills or providing an opportunity to give back for the benefit of others.

Networking is key for professionals, as many times it is "who you know" that opens doors. The HIM leader focus groups agreed that volunteering provides an opportunity to network. Volunteering surrounds you with other dedicated professionals with advanced skill sets. This can also help you develop your own skills. Also, volunteer activities usually are a group effort, so participants learn how to work with people who likely have differing work styles, opinions, and skill levels. Jannifer Owens, MSA, BSHA, CCS, CPC, CIRCC, the senior HIM coding director at Banner Health, says in order to work with others one must develop "an environment of appropriate, respectful communication where all can be open, honest, and not afraid to state their opinion."

Networking allows you to identify with the best and the brightest, and also allows others to find you as one of the stars. Additionally, networking provides a group of colleagues with whom to ask questions or look for best practices.

Volunteer positions provide the opportunity to learn new skills, expand current skills, or try out different skills. Within a work environment, many times you are using one set of skills and don't have the opportunity to expand those skills. Volunteering allows this opportunity. You can choose a volunteer position that expands familiar skill sets or learn something completely new. The leadership panelists discussed how they refined current skills, such as directing a team, or expanded those skills by trying a position different from what they did in their current practice.

HIM professionals can assess their volunteer leadership skills by completing the Volunteer Leadership Competencies Self Assessment at www.ahima.org/volunteers. This assessment can help identify what volunteer positions might fit your skills or which ones you would like to strengthen in a volunteer role. After the assessment, look for volunteer opportunities at both the local component state association and the national AHIMA.

Continued learning should be an objective for all professionals, and is key for leaders. The focus group participants identified a number of ways that they, as leaders, continue to learn. This included listening to other people and also taking ideas and morphing them into their own. They agreed that leaders “don’t have to reinvent the wheel.” Additionally, listen to other people’s stories, since these are invaluable learning opportunities. They may have handled a situation similar to one you are dealing with currently. Lastly, develop strategic planning skills. A leader in any capacity must have this ability.

Getting to know someone through a volunteer opportunity can lead to a job opportunity. Many within the focus group shared how volunteering opened doors to promising career opportunities. An employer could see you as a leader in a volunteer role and then think of you for a position when it becomes available. For the volunteer, it allows you to get to know others and show off your strengths.

Resilience, grit, and confidence are three core leadership characteristics that author Lareina Yee identifies as necessary for women to be successfully viewed as leaders in her recent article “Fostering Women Leaders: A fitness test for your top team.”

In a female-dominated profession, these findings are important and also consistent with the focus group’s insights. While not necessarily referred to with the same words, the HIM leaders identified these characteristics as confidence, courage, and the desire to achieve. To sum up their advice to future leaders of the profession: Preparation begets opportunity, so prepare academically, volunteer, and network. Do this and you will be ready to make your mark when opportunity arises.

Reference

Yee, Lareina. “Fostering women leaders: A fitness test for your top team.” *McKinsey Quarterly*. January 2015.
www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/fostering_women_leaders_a_fitness_test_for_your_top_team.

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