Three Skills Your Managers Need To Thrive Amidst Change

A Guide for Supporting The Overwhelmed Health Care Manager

Questions Addressed:

• What challenges are ahead for health care managers?
• What skills can help managers be less overwhelmed?
• How can organizations cultivate these skills among the managerial ranks?
Talent Development
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An Era of Change

Today’s health care providers face an onslaught of change. From evolving technology, to new competitors, to higher standards—the pace and scope of change is daunting. Virtually all hospitals and health systems struggle to contend with these forces:

Managers The Key To Success

These forces certainly pose strategic challenges for executive teams, who must create a strategy for how best to respond. The success of their response, however, ultimately rests on operational and clinical managers, who are responsible for translating executive strategy into a reality at the frontlines of health care.

To that end, organizations are asking more from the managerial ranks than ever before. Managers are asked to solve challenges that don’t yet have time-tested solutions. They are asked to implement between five and 15 initiatives simultaneously within their area of responsibility—many of which are assigned by different senior leaders, departments, and external governing bodies to which managers must answer. Ultimately, managers are asked to transform their departments while also ensuring that day-to-day operations continue to run smoothly.

Managers Feeling Overwhelmed

Right when organizations need more from their managers, managers are struggling to ‘keep their heads above water.’ Industry-level forces and executive-level strategy have profound implications for managers. They must train—and re-train—staff, overhaul internal processes, keep their team motivated and engaged, track more metrics, implement new clinical guidelines—the list goes on.

When we ask managers to describe their experiences at work, they use many different terms: “burnout,” “stress,” and “change fatigue” are chief among them. The common denominator is that managers are overwhelmed by the pace and scope of change—and change initiatives—on their plates.
Managers must develop skills to take control of their own stress levels at work.

In fact, studies show that the majority of managers are struggling amidst rapid change.1

The majority of health care managers experience change fatigue and burnout.

60% Health care workers who have felt burned out

65% Managers who have experienced change fatigue

These numbers pose immediate threats to organization’s change efforts:

• Managers do not have the requisite focus and energy to achieve everything on their plates, putting strategic initiatives at risk of failure. One survey of 2,200 hospital executives found that 70% of strategic initiatives ultimately fail.2

• Managers set the tone for their teams. If managers are burned out, they risk spreading “secondhand stress” across their entire staff. Similarly, if managers are negative or skeptical of change efforts, their staff will be, too.

• Managers who experience prolonged stress leave. One study of 290 nurse managers found that burnout was the most cited reason for leaving an organization.3

Organizational Efforts Falling Short

Most hospitals and health systems recognize the need to support overwhelmed managers and have taken steps to reduce their stress. Popular efforts include mentorship, flex scheduling, yoga, and creating relaxation areas. These offerings are an important starting point, but the industry has yet to crack the code on how best to support managers. According to Advisory Board data, only 40% of employees feel their organizations help them with stress and burnout.

The industry needs a more effective approach. We’ve found that one proactive solution is to develop managers’ self-efficacy in the workplace by giving them skills to take more control of their own stress levels at work. Rapid change will not slow down any time soon. Developing manager’s ability to work amidst that change more sustainably and with more focus sets them up for long-term success. We’ve identified three key skills that help managers thrive amidst change:

1. Clarifying priorities
2. Scoping involvement in initiatives
3. Advocating for oneself

This whitepaper explores what each of these three skills entails, and how organizations can cultivate them among their managerial ranks.

2. Herman B, “70% of Hospital Strategic Initiatives Fail,” Becker’s Hospital Review, September 2012.

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Managers Spread Too Thin

Perhaps the most foundational skill needed at the manager level is judicious prioritization. Without it, managers will continue to be spread too thin. When we talk with managers, we currently hear that they determine what work to focus on using criteria such as:

- **What’s urgent**: last minute requests, crisis management, and “firefighting”
- **What’s new**: new requests that are most top-of-mind for the manager
- **What’s familiar**: work the manager has historically done, maybe in an old role

What’s missing from this list is **what’s most important**, e.g. tasks that advance the organization’s key strategic initiatives and have the **greatest** impact; and **what’s energizing**, e.g. activities that are **intrinsically** motivating and fulfilling for the manager.

Confirming Priorities With Leadership

To prioritize effectively, managers need the comfort and savvy necessary to have frank conversations with their leadership to confirm and align priorities. Often times, this means providing leadership with greater visibility into requests the manager is getting from other areas of the organization. It also means making tough, collaborative decisions to home in on the 3-5 things that truly meet the “priority” bar—and take precedence over other work:

What Constitutes a Priority?

- ✔ Directly supports a strategic initiative or business need
- ✔ Is top-of-license for your level and skillset
- ✔ Can be significantly advanced in the **next month**

Confirming priorities with leadership is a critical managerial skill—not only to create focus, but to ensure that what the manager assumes is important truly creates value.

Focusing Time and Energy on Priorities

Identifying priorities is only half the battle. The greater challenge at the managerial level is having the discipline to focus one’s time and energy on priority work—and not be thrown off course by less important tasks. To do this successfully, managers must develop and practice a strict system for handling non-priority work:

- **Defer**: Reschedule to a later date on your calendar
- **Delegate**: Hand off to a colleague or a different team
- **Eliminate**: Cross off of your list entirely

Ultimately, managers who are able to use these tactics develop more sustainable workload management skills over time, and free up capacity to accomplish the **right** tasks.
Skill #2: Scoping Level of Involvement

**Leading vs. Managing Change**

Once managers know what priorities they should advance, the next step is to scope their level of involvement—especially when it comes to the many change initiatives on their plates. To do so, managers must distinguish between change leadership and management:

- **Change Leadership:** The skillset to design, lead, and influence others to adopt a single initiative for which you personally are the primary owner.

- **Change Management:** The skillset to implement multiple initiatives at once in your area of responsibility that other leaders or departments ultimately own.

The pitfall many managers fall into is attempting to apply classic change leadership tools to *every* change initiative: detailed stakeholder analysis, rigorous project plans, initiative launch events, communication blasts, celebrations when an initiative has ended, etc. These tools are appropriate for the few initiatives managers personally own, but they quickly become burdensome when multiplying them across all 5-15 initiatives at once. Instead, managers should determine the level of involvement required for each initiative:

**Developing True Change Management Skills**

For initiatives that require change management, managers must shift their mindset from completing a single change more effectively—to advancing multiple simultaneously.

We work with managers to develop their own change management systems that advance multiple initiatives at once, regardless of what those changes are. These systems include:

- **A progress document** that keeps the right metrics top-of-mind for staff long-term.

- **A communication system** that provides routine, comprehensive change updates.

- **A “change team”** to role model and troubleshoot implementation across all initiatives.

- **A single theme** that rationalizes and unifies many individual change initiatives.

Developing and using a change management system requires the discipline to manage initiatives in aggregate, and not fall back into one-off initiative management. Doing so takes time and practice; but long-term, it frees up manager’s time and decreases change fatigue.
Skill #3: Advocating for Oneself

Managers Often Hesitant To Ask For Help

Finally, managers need to effectively advocate for their needs in the workplace—what they need to achieve their priorities and what they need to feel supportive and positive at work. One of the concerns we hear most often among managers is fear that they will be perceived as contrarians, or poor team players, or vulnerable if they say “no” or ask for help at work. But managers must gain comfort and confidence speaking up in order to work more sustainably.

Tapping Into Available Support

The reality is there is a rich array of support available within any health care organization—but much of it goes overlooked. Many managers default to asking for additional staff or funding to solve workload challenges. However, other types of support are often easier to ask for, and more effective in easing their workload:

- More senior leaders can make these resources move visible to managers, and also help managers identify and get connected with support beyond their immediate teams.

Saying “No”

A willingness to say “no” is another mindset shift and skill that can help managers stay sane during times of rapid change and heavy workloads. Saying “no” to non-priority work protects managers’ time, energy, and focus for priority work—and gives them an increases sense of autonomy over their workload.

This can be an especially scary suggestion for managers who feel they don’t have the authority or don’t feel empowered to push back against requests. For those managers, it’s especially important that they learn how to navigate such conversations, and that they develop language that is comfortable for them personally. For example, some managers may not prefer saying “no” outright, but can accomplish the same goals by saying “not now” or “yes, but…” to negotiate the terms of their commitments. Developing this skill is as much as developing manager’s confidence, as it is the ability to navigate difficult conversations and negotiate.

Helping managers recognize available support creates new opportunities for self advocacy.

Saying “no” to some work lets managers say “yes” to their highest priorities.
Developing Managers’ Skills

Common Barriers To Development

Helping managers develop prioritization, role scoping, and advocacy skills is an important way to support them during times of increased change and stress. These skills are particularly important because they empower managers to take more control over their own experiences at work—but they are also some of the most difficult to develop. Two of the most common barriers we hear include:

• The perception that these skills run counter to organizational culture; managers worry that saying "no" or talking with leadership about what work they can de-prioritize will not be well received.

• Personal discomfort or lack of confidence having difficult conversations around workload and personal capacity.

How To Support Development

In our 14+ years developing leadership skills among the health care managers, we’ve found a few strategies that help overcome these barriers and develop these skills:

• Show managers examples and case studies of how other leaders in health care have employed these skills—and how they benefited—to assure managers that these tactics will be well-received.

• Bring senior leadership into the fold; ask leaders to role model these skills themselves, or even prompt the types of conversations suggested in this whitepaper, to further encourage managers.

• Practice makes perfect. Provide true-to-life scenarios and role plays for managers to practice these skills, experiment with different language, and gain confidence in a safe space among peers.

• Provide tools and resources to help keep lessons learned top-of-mind for managers amidst all the requests, deadlines, and new changes competing for managers attention. Ensure that these tools are easy for managers to refer to and use in-the-moment.

Talent Development Partnerships

Our Solution For Overwhelmed Managers

The Advisory Board’s Talent Development team works with hundreds of hospitals and health systems to train emerging health care leaders.

Most recently, we’ve been working closely with provider organizations to upskill their managers in stress management and change management specifically. Our program offerings include:

- **Reduce Stress and Burnout**
  
  Gives leaders the skills they need to take more control of their own stress levels in the workplace

- **Develop Change Management Discipline**
  
  Helps leaders create a personalized change management system to advance and track progress for multiple initiatives at once

- **Leading Change**
  
  Prepares leaders to successfully plan and lead a single change initiative, including getting stakeholders on board

- **Leading Amidst Uncertainty**
  
  Gives leaders the skills they need to stay balanced, make decisions, and communicate with staff during times of rapid change and uncertainty

The Advisory Board Advantage: We Know Healthcare

- **3,800+** Hospitals and health care organizations in our membership

- **1,100+** Consulting engagements completed in health care organizations

- **300** Industry experts conducting research in most pressing health care issues

The Talent Development Advantage: We Know Leadership

- **$20M** Overall investment in building leadership development curriculum

- **80,000+** Healthcare Leaders participating in Talent Development programs

- **98%** Participants who believe our workshops will make them more effective leaders

- **95%** Participants who would recommend the workshops they attend to colleagues

Talent Development Partnership

A Talent Development Partnership can help you equip your managers with the skills, knowledge, and tools to work more effectively and sustainably in today’s health care environment. To learn more about this research and how we can support your organization’s managers, contact us at HartmanM@advisory.com