



Ryan Donohue

## Patients Are 'Patient' No Longer

*Harness the board's powerful perspective to improve the healthcare experience.*

In healthcare, patients lie at the center of decisions made and actions taken. Board meetings or leadership retreats often begin with patients top of mind—perhaps by sharing a reflection on a patient experience or reading a letter written by someone recently treated. But, as leaders get into the myriad challenges they face—issues with access, reimbursement, workforce, physician shortages, employee burnout or other operational and cultural challenges—they can begin to lose that all-important focus on the patient.

As healthcare leaders find themselves navigating an ever-changing landscape, now is the moment to enhance the focus on consumers and patients, and it requires unified leadership from both boards and senior executives. Patients want improved healthcare experiences, and they are tired of waiting.

Though departments aimed at improving the patient experience are important in driving the consumer- and patient-led revolution for better experiences, these efforts should stretch throughout the organization. An unlikely but suitable partner is the board of directors. With one foot inside the organization, many board members bring customer-oriented skills from the outside world. They also often hold personal knowledge of

how long and sometimes lonely the patient journey can seem.

Engaging with patients usually requires overcoming one of six barriers: care deferment, the blurring of traditional brands in consumers' minds, new entrants that offer additional care choices, higher patient expectations, paying for care, and the lack of lasting relationships between providers and patients. It's a sometimes vicious cycle of consumers grappling with being a patient and possibly feeling like a number in the healthcare system.

To truly address these challenges, leadership can:

- **Use the board's fresh perspective:** It's true that those working inside the hospital are closest to the patients and provide valuable perspectives, but solutions may require a wider lens with more objectivity. Senior leaders harnessing the generative wisdom of the board and asking for their input on patient engagement challenges can be powerful, offering bigger-picture ideas and solutions.
- **Build a strong commitment at both the board and CEO level:** Board members should be

willing to commit to a future-facing strategy in which money invested in an integrated consumer-facing platform becomes preeminent, and CEOs are held accountable for progress in addressing patient and community needs.

- **Collaborate to ensure the patient is always the focus:** The two-way benefits of conversations between the board and management around patient experience can reverberate throughout an organization. Board members often seek engagement with those on the inside, and management seeks board approval and a general feeling that they are doing a good job. While the board typically maintains a strategic distance, management can easily become consumed by their work and tangled up in processes, which can sap attention—even at the top. By maintaining focus and prioritizing the patient experience, the board and senior leaders can work together to ensure that they don't lose focus on patients while solving the problems of the system.
- **View care through the patient's eyes:** Consumers and patients may feel they aren't directly involved enough in their own care and that they spend too much of their own money on that care. Leaders should consider that consumers and patients envision

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healthcare much like any other service—something that is personally tailored to their needs and done accurately and quickly. Otherwise, they are willing to go elsewhere.

Healthcare leaders can use patient-centeredness, advocated by the CEO and backed by the board, as an antidote to healthcare's systems distractions. Centering on patients can also provide good boundaries. CEOs work hard to strike a balance between engaging board members and keeping them out of the operational weeds. Centering on patients requires the board to keep patients in a wide but strategic focus, asking patient-focused questions and giving resources based on how they help patients.

Patient-centeredness also gives management the power to execute their work through a tighter lens and enables them to use their dedicated talents all the way to the bedside. Top to bottom, patients can serve as the strategic connector among the many levels of the organization.

CEOs own the overall consumer journey, but they cannot do it alone. A CEO's job starts with their trustees. Every leader needs a strong, courageous board. It takes a bold group of trustees to look at the future, culture change, innovation and commitment to the community. They need to ask themselves who represents the community and how can they be supported. It seems the board may be the secret weapon in

the consumer- and patient-led revolution.

Understanding how patients and consumers feel and gauging the current state of the revolution in a particular area requires community engagement. Patients and consumers will be more than willing to share their needs and expectations. With the patient in focus and engaged leadership in tow, the future of healthcare will be brighter for all. ▲

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