

Can Physicians Lead Transformation?

A new boot camp program for Chicago Medical Society members

By Susan F. Reynolds, MD, PhD

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PHYSIcian leaders are needed more than ever due to dramatic changes in the health care industry. However, the delivery system is changing so rapidly that physicians who aspire to lead need ongoing education to stay up-to-date on new modes of practice, payment models, and business alignments that help multiple stakeholders succeed. Physicians also need new skills and competencies.

This column is the first in a series that will discuss what physicians need to know and do in order to be successful in new and evolving leadership roles. For over the past decade, The Institute for Medical Leadership has conducted dozens of physician programs, including 31 Chief of Staff Boot Camps, helping hospital and medical society leaders prepare for new challenges.

The Pace Color Palette

In many of our programs we ask, “Do physicians have the best personality types to lead transformation effectively?” Using the Pace Color Palette we have done on-site personality testing of physicians, including Chicago Medical Society leaders. The results are always surprising when compared to those of the general population, and leaders, specifically.

The Pace Color Palette (www.paceorg.com) uses four colors—red, yellow, blue, and green—to denote four basic personality types. Reds are action-oriented (Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, and Indiana Jones); Yellows like structure and are process-driven (George Washington, Donald Rumsfeld, and Smokey the Bear); Blues are focused on harmony and consensus (Charles Schultz, Phoebe on “Friends,” but no U.S. presidents); and Greens tend to be out-of-the-box thinkers and strategists (Albert Einstein, Alan Greenspan, and Abraham Lincoln).

According to the PACE Organization, 40% of Americans are Reds; 40% are Yellows; 15% are Blues; and 5% are Greens. Leaders tend to be Red, Yellow, or Green, but rarely, Blue. When we

test our physician audiences, Reds are often not present at all or are present in very low numbers. About 40% of physicians tend to be Yellows, liking process and structure; 40% of physicians are Blues who like harmony and consensus; and 15-20% are Greens who tend to think outside-of-the box.

The prevalence of Yellows and Blues among physicians is not surprising since physicians are students of the scientific method, learning evidence-based medicine through data analysis (Yellow trait). Many physicians are caring, and compassionate with excellent bedside manners (Blue trait). Academic researchers are often highly innovative (Green Trait). (See “The General Population vs. Physicians” chart below).


My hypothesis is that the length of medical training may weed out Reds, who by nature are impatient and tend to act quickly. But a lack of action orientation can put physicians at a significant disadvantage when working to transform the health care system. Physicians may get too bogged down in process to act quickly (for example, having to deal with CPT coding, ICD-10, and PQRS reporting among other items). Or physicians may be too accommodating toward others to make the tough decisions necessary to transform an embedded culture. Physicians may have innovative ideas, put structure to those ideas, and get along with others, but they will need to work with action-oriented people (Reds) in order to bring those ideas into reality quickly and in order to truly lead.

Sign Up Now

On May 20, at the Chicago Medical Society’s Midwest Clinical Conference, we will give the PACE color palette test so that attendees can gain more insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their own personality traits. Attendees will learn how to lead and collaborate with those dissimilar to themselves.

For information about Chief of Staff Boot Camps, please see the notice on page 14 of this issue and the Calender of Events on page 31 of this issue. The

Institute for Medical Leadership will hold these events on Jan. 22-23, 2016, at the Santa Monica Doubletree, Calif., and on Feb. 26-27, 2016, at the New Orleans Marriott. CMS members may attend at a discounted rate and earn up to 14.5 CME credits.

Susan Reynolds, MD, PhD, is president and CEO, The Institute for Medical Leadership. 

The General Population vs. Physicians

PACE Color	General Population	Physicians
Red	40%	0-5%
Yellow	40%	40%
Blue	15%	40%
Green	5%	15-20%