

Priming the pipeline for success with Kaiser Permanente's leadership teams

Janet Liang outlines the key to creating a strong bench of talent for organizational stability

A C-Suite Conversation with

Janet Liang

President, Northern California Region
of Kaiser Permanente



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A lot of organizations talk about the importance of talent pipelines in their leadership ranks, but Janet Liang backs up her words with plenty of action.

Liang, President of the Northern California region of Kaiser Permanente – a region with 4.2 million members, 72,000 employees and 21 hospitals – has developed several successful leadership initiatives, including a Nurse Scholars Academy, an Emerging Leaders program, a Chief Operating Officers bootcamp and a Finance Leaders Academy.

"I want the organization to have bench strength so we're never

vulnerable in terms of our ability to deliver our plans and build our momentum," she says. "I believe that stability and continuity in leadership is critical for the organization. We have big aspirations – not just for our patients, but for their families and communities."

The nature of Kaiser Permanente's business, which is both provider and payer, makes it difficult at times to find talent that will fit, Liang says.

"Because we're an integrated care and coverage organization, we're unique," she says. "And so, by that very nature, people don't come out of the industry ready to work for Kaiser Permanente. I've learned I've got to reach out to our directors and managers to begin to cultivate future executives for this organization, people who are aligned deeply with our values and also have learned the dynamics of our business from the ground up."

Succession planning is a key ingredient of a successful organization, and it is not limited to the CEO or president position. Companies must determine which leaders are ready now to move up, which ones have future potential and create development plans and transition plans for its

high-potential leaders.

Many organizations create stretch assignments that groom leaders who have an experience gap or two on their resume. In Kaiser Permanente's case, "We identify high-visibility projects that allow people to fill their experience gaps," Liang says.

Research shows that talent mapping, such as succession planning, can not only help an organization develop its leaders, but also retain those leaders and attract top talent.

Succession planning is not solely the responsibility of the Human Resources department, it's the responsibility of every leader in your organization. As a leader, here are three actions you can start immediately to begin the process:

- 1 Think about your team ...**
if you decided to leave your company tomorrow, who could step in immediately?
- 2 Now, imagine that person in the role.** What additional skills or leadership training would they need? If there isn't someone who could take over immediately, is there someone you could work

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to develop, or would you need to bring someone in from another part of the company? None of the above? What would it look like if you had to go to market and find someone to fill the position?

- 3 Think through a similar** scenario for each of your team members. Is there someone that could step into their position immediately? And so on ...

This initial exercise can give you the start of a talent map, which can help you and others understand the true depth of the bench strength on your team. This can often give you the background you need to ask for leadership development resources and, possibly, the addition of new talent to your team.

Removing unconscious bias for identifying leaders

Liang began the leadership programs immediately when she joined the Northern California region after seven years as president of Kaiser Permanente's Hawaii region. She came to Northern California as the chief operating officer and became president two years later.

She is proud of the success of the Emerging Leaders Program, which targets front-line staff – engineers, social workers, environmental services workers, etc. – and takes an unorthodox approach.

“Most traditional programs will say, ‘Ask a manager to identify someone.’ But I think there is too much unconscious bias in how we think about who’s going to be a future leader, so we said anyone could raise their hand.”

The response was enormous.

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Kaiser Permanente's Gregory Adams evaluates Liang's impact on healthcare

The moves that Janet Liang has made at Kaiser Permanente have created many positive changes in Kaiser Permanente and the industry, says Gregory A. Adams, Executive Vice President and Group President, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, Inc. and Hospitals.

He offers a few examples of that in the interview below:



Gregory Adams

Q *In the rapidly changing healthcare climate, what are the key traits needed in today's leaders? How does Janet embody that?* Gregory Adams

A “Leaders today have to respond to the demands of a rapidly evolving marketplace while staying true to the timeless values that must always be at the heart of healthcare. Janet is a nimble and persistent leader able to focus both on short and long-term strategic objectives. She is community-focused, curious, optimistic and always confident in taking on complex challenges. She is deeply committed to identifying and developing diverse talent for today and tomorrow’s healthcare needs which is critical to sustainable success.”

Q *How have the leadership development programs she has created impacted Kaiser?*

A “Janet always has her eye on the long-term sustainability of the Kaiser Permanente mission and the people who will carry that mission forward. The Emerging Leaders Program and other leadership development programs she launched in Northern California are helping to build a strong, deep and diverse leadership bench of early career employees as the next generation of healthcare leaders. These programs have promoted fresh thinking in the organization while improving retention and engagement.

“Janet also founded the Kaiser Permanente Nurse Scholars Academy to increase the number of Kaiser Permanente nurses with bachelor’s and advanced degrees in nursing. Research shows that hospitals that employ nurses with higher levels of education have better patient outcomes. As part of the program, many of the nurses pursuing degrees have completed quality improvement projects at their local medical centers. It is this kind of personal investment that empowers nurses to be champions of innovation and care transformation.”

“There were three hands raised for each slot we had in the first pilot we did,” Liang says. “And the first class was 65 percent diverse. We didn’t try for that; it just happened. And that was such a powerful message to us.”

Anecdotally, leaders tell us that ethnically diverse and women leaders are sometimes hesitant to advocate for themselves, thinking that hard work alone will get them noticed. Liang’s hypothesis lends support to the notion that is not always the case.

Study after study shows that diverse businesses function better, innovate more readily and are more financially successful. In fact, some businesses, including Kaiser Permanente, use DEI metrics (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) to determine their progress as a firm.

Leadership programs fuel diversity

Diverse leaders who have made it to the top in healthcare organizations say diversity alone is not enough.

There is a saying in diversity circles that, “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.” True equity, however, comes when diverse leaders are in charge of the party. In that vein, Liang has succeeded and is working to ensure that Kaiser Permanente remains a magnet for the best leaders.

She says she herself benefited from a diversity fellowship program early in her career at Group Health, where she worked before joining

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EXECUTIVE’S TOOLKIT: Having a passion for the mission

“I’m a big observer of other leaders,” she says. “I have a natural curiosity about how individuals inspire, mobilize and influence others. I notice leaders who can inspire people and get them connected to a mission that’s greater than themselves.”

One of the reasons that Liang has been so successful at Kaiser Permanente is that she resonates with its mission.

“My choice to work at Kaiser Permanente is a real intentional one,” she says. “Our integrated care and coverage model allows us to care for our members in the context of total health. I feel very fortunate to be able to connect my personal values with the organization I work for.”

... The mission of healthcare is what drew Liang away from going to law school in favor of pursuing a career in healthcare.

“What caught my attention,” she says, “was this conversation in the late 1980s in our country about

healthcare as a basic right. I grew up in a first-generation, immigrant Chinese family in the San Francisco Bay area. We relied on safety net organizations, we benefited from public assistance programs, and we had times in our life growing up where the cost of getting care was a real burden for our family.”

“It’s a well-known statistic in the healthcare industry that 20 percent of what we can do as medical professionals can have an impact on long-term mortality,” she says. “Forty percent is around behavior and lifestyle, ten percent is genetics, and then the rest is ZIP code. Your ZIP code is really more telling than your DNA.”

Mindful of that burden for today’s families, Kaiser Permanente is ... moving ever more upstream into the communities it serves, Liang says. The focus, she says, is on jobs, education, safety and affordable housing, and convening public officials and community

representatives to come together to change the environment in which people live.

Passion for an organization’s mission can be contagious. Leaders who are engaged in the purpose of their organization can transmit that enthusiasm to their direct reports. It is often that passion that jumpstarts an executive’s upward career trajectory. Without it, organizations often experience excessive turnover in the talent ranks.

For Liang, personal and professional purpose intersect in her work at Kaiser Permanente.

“We’re founded on a mission that says we exist to deliver high-quality, affordable healthcare. That’s really why I was drawn to work here. I feel a responsibility to our members and patients, who trust us with their lives and essentially their happiness, and to our employees, who have come to Kaiser Permanente to help others while fulfilling joy and meaning in their careers.”

Kaiser Permanente.

"It jump-started my career," she says. "So, I was influenced by that and am excited to be in a role that allows me to give back."

Diversity, in fact, is a driving force

in all the leadership programs Liang has created.

"I use the programs strategically to promote more diversity in our leadership ranks," she says. "I look at how many people we are developing

through the programs. Even if people don't advance right away, I can tell you they're re-energized and doing the job they do today in a better way with that development than they would have without it." [MPI](#)

Resources for Action

ARTICLE: Executive Team Performance

Want better team performance? Check out this article to jump-start your plan for better team cohesiveness.

From assessing individual leaders to evaluating culture and aligning with organizational goals, the key to developing a strong executive leadership team doesn't have to be a mystery or a guessing game. Unlocking these strengths is complex, but having a solid plan with authentic, meaningful metrics is critical.

5 steps to unlocking your team's potential:

1. Assessment and awareness
2. Facilitated development
3. Alignment and measurement
4. Refinement
5. Action planning and execution

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