

Leadership development and experiences a strong foundation for Ryu

Physicians find executive career paths challenging without the proper leadership training

A C-Suite Conversation with

Jaewon Ryu, MD, JD

EVP and Chief Medical Officer, Geisinger Health System

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Jaewon Ryu, the executive vice president and chief medical officer for Geisinger Health System, trained as both a physician and a lawyer, but says his greatest leadership development came through experiences like the White House Fellows (WHF) Program, a yearlong, non-partisan education program that places early/mid-career people in high-level cabinet offices and trains them for leadership and public service.

“Whether training or working as an attorney or a physician, nowhere in that process do you really learn leadership,” says Ryu, a native of suburban Chicago. “You pick up

some skills along the way through your training and work, but the WHF Program was a wonderful way to immerse in leadership development – seeing how decisions are made within complex organizations, being able to hear from great leaders, and taking on projects to apply these learnings.”

Ryu’s description is apt. Many healthcare executives, including clinical leaders, might believe that taking a seminar or getting a few sessions of executive coaching fortifies them for the work of leadership. But trained, focused work in leadership development is best accomplished with trained facilitators and convened as part of a thoughtful program within a team, allowing a leadership group to find alignment and cohesion.

The importance of leadership development

Numerous studies indicate that leadership development is not typically part of a physician’s training, but it increasingly needs to be. The value of having a physician leader at the helm of an organization has long been proven to increase the success of healthcare organizations. Unfortunately, the demand for such leaders is not met with an abundant supply of qualified,

ready-to-hit-the-ground-running physician leaders.

In fact, Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic and many other large providers value physician leadership so much that they started their own physician-leader training program. These programs feed a system of succession planning and readiness to ensure that the organizations have an adequate pool of potential physician leaders at any given moment.

Many other organizations do not have the resources for such training programs. According to Athena Health, 53 percent of healthcare organizations lack a physician leadership development program. Although, as we can see from backgrounds like Ryu’s, there are other options for leadership development -- from hiring a development partner to attending programs offered by other organizations. These types of external partners and programs can offer additional experiences and backgrounds that leaders may not receive in an internal program.

In the WHF program, besides meeting with the likes of government leaders (cabinet members, the President and Vice President, members of Congress and other

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elected officials), policy thought leaders, and high-profile business leaders, Ryu said the camaraderie and learning from the other Fellows contributed to his growth through that experience.

“You learn so much from each other in talking about experiences and various leadership insights,” he says. “We had military officers, folks from for-profit industries, academic and policy thought leaders, as well as others. I don’t think I would have been exposed to emerging leaders from so many backgrounds if not for that program.”

Leadership development is a key focus for many healthcare organizations, especially as many senior executives exit the industry through retirement and as changes in the industry accelerate. To prepare younger leaders for future opportunities, the importance of formal and informal mentoring can’t be overstated.

Ryu says the WHF program was “a privilege” because it gave him time to consider his interests and the various ways to pursue them.

“For example,” he says, “how do you develop a network of people who can mentor you, and how do you seek out their guidance on potential career paths? I was really fortunate to have a few folks step out as informal mentors helping me to think through things.”

Leaders need to be well-rounded

Ryu’s natural curiosity, about people, their health, and ways to improve the health system, has yielded him an intriguing life and career.

“I may not be as planned out as some folks,” he says. “I’ve met people, many of whom are my friends, who are pretty well planned as far as their path – they’ve known for some

The view from the top on Ryu

David T. Feinberg, M.D., MBA, Geisinger President and CEO, says Jaewon Ryu, MD, has been a game-changer for Geisinger as Chief Medical Officer and Executive Vice President.

“His commitment to creating an environment that embraces value-based care has been transformational,” Feinberg says. “He has built new programs and enacted new policies that are creating positive change, both for our patients and our providers.”

Feinberg calls Ryu a “brilliant and dedicated physician leader” who fits well with the Geisinger mission.

“Our primary purpose at Geisinger is to take care of our patients, our communities, our members and our family,” he says. “Dr. Ryu is instrumental in our efforts to deliver high-quality care by an integrated, multidisciplinary care team at the right time and in the right place.”



time what they want to do, where they want to live, and when they want to have key events in their lives. That generally hasn’t been the case for me. I’ve just tried to follow the advice of simply pursuing my interests and seeing where that takes me.”

After college, Ryu was part of a 20-person bicycling caravan that rode coast to coast to raise funds for Habitat for Humanity. That indelible experience also gave him insights into leadership, he says.

“It was a great growth experience. We had to deal with a lot of interpersonal dynamics through a fairly challenging experience, making sure we were working effectively as a team,” he says. “I think those lessons are translatable to any environment.”

Ryu’s sense of the importance of the group aspect of leadership is well-founded. Leadership is not best developed in a vacuum. In a field where patients primarily encounter the healthcare system when they are ailing, in which financial risk also is heightened for the health system or health plan, organizations function best when the team is aligned with the mission and vision of the organization

and working together smoothly.

But Ryu’s exact career path was an open question earlier in his journey. Because of his interest in urban policy, he first worked as a teacher and counselor in an inner-city youth enrichment program. After that, he enrolled in a joint MD-JD program at the University of Chicago. He took time off after getting his law degree to work for an international corporate law firm in Los Angeles as a junior attorney working on healthcare mergers and acquisitions. He loved it, but clinical medicine was still calling to him.

“In the end, there’s something pretty unique about being a clinician, and that’s what ultimately drew me back to medicine,” he says.

The payer-provider overlap

He trained as an emergency room physician, but his executive career has taken him from Kaiser Permanente to the University of Illinois and then Humana, the health insurer, before he joined Geisinger in 2016.

Ryu is a huge admirer of models like Kaiser’s and Geisinger’s that can

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coordinate, finance and deliver care, and he says his work at Humana helped broaden his exposure across the healthcare industry. As the lines continue to blur between providers and payers, he thinks it will favor organizations that span across these functions and people who have developed skills across this spectrum.

"I think what it means for leadership in healthcare is that leaders need to have tools for understanding both sides of that world," he says. "Providers need to understand the financing of healthcare. Likewise, on the health-plan side, it's becoming more important to understand how to better manage people's health."

The best physician leaders will indeed carry this broader perspective in assessing the strengths and opportunities for their organizations. That takes time and leadership development, as Ryu's experience might suggest. He notes, for example, that clinicians are well-positioned to enhance value in how healthcare can be improved.

"There is benefit in starting with that premium dollar and being able to march it all the way down to the patient. By understanding how that healthcare dollar gets spent, and what brings value to that patient and what doesn't, we can improve the industry." **MPI**

EXECUTIVE'S TOOLKIT:

Helping physicians find their way in leadership

When asked about any advice he might have for clinicians or others interested in leadership, Ryu offers a couple of thoughts.

"The first piece of advice is that you've got to follow your passion," he says. "It makes the job so much easier if you genuinely enjoy what you're doing. And, unless you're an Oscar-caliber actress like Meryl Streep, you can't fake it – it's going to show if you don't enjoy what you're doing. From a leadership standpoint, you won't be as effective or influential.

"The second thing I would say is that it helps to be adaptable. What's wonderful about the field of medicine is that the learning never stops. And that plays toward being adaptable and willing to learn and embrace change, or else the change ends up being done to you instead of you helping to direct the change."

With this advice in mind, how can you build a stronger development map for your team?

Catalog the strengths of those on your team – where do certain members excel vs. others?

- Assess the gaps in skill, talent and personality on your team.

- Identify opportunities for development – where does your team need to be stronger and who has the most potential to strengthen? Also, be sure to identify where some team members could help build up others on the team by collaborating on projects together.
- Find partners and programs that can help you create a plan for additional training. These types of programs can often be tailored to fit your organization's culture and specific team challenges.
- If there are gaps that cannot be fixed through development (e.g., you need someone with a stronger background in technology, but no one on your current team has capacity, passion or even basic knowledge in this area), begin planning for future hires. What would the role look like? Who would be the ideal candidate? By exploring these things as part of a larger talent development strategy, you can often make a stronger case for hiring new team members.

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