

3 must-haves in the CEO role

Real-world advice: ‘Operational knowledge is essential to casting vision,’ says Pamela Sutton-Wallace

A C-Suite Conversation with

Pamela Sutton-Wallace

CEO, University of Virginia Medical Center



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In her four years as the CEO of the University of Virginia Medical Center, Pamela Sutton-Wallace has led the push to transform care delivery with an unwavering focus on quality, patient safety and service. Together with Executive Vice President Richard P. Shannon, she introduced Lean principles and implemented new processes and structures to equip the entire team with the skills needed for this transformation.

The medical center conducts a daily 10 a.m. huddle with leaders and managers from across the organization to immediately tackle any issues related to

mortalities, infections, patient falls or staff-member injuries that may have occurred in the previous 24 hours.

In addition, she hired additional team members to afford frontline staff more time to focus on and participate in continuous improvement activities, ensuring that the organization was meeting its aggressive performance goals. But she kept it as simple as possible.

“Our organization collects and reports almost 500 quality measures, and we’re a relatively small organization,” she says. “There’s no way an organization can effectively improve all of those measures simultaneously, so I told my team, ‘Let’s focus on those measures with the greatest opportunity for improvement and where we can be most effective.’”

Sutton-Wallace sees three qualities as essential for the CEO role.

#1 Dedicated Focus

In addition to her experience in the insurance and pharmaceutical industries, Sutton-Wallace credits her background as an operations leader (for Duke University Hospital) as solid preparation for her role as CEO.

In succession planning, of course, a chief operating officer is often viewed as the heir apparent

when the CEO leaves. In fact, an ErnstYoung study revealed that 54 percent of COOs in rapid-growth markets desired to ascend to the CEO role. EY noted that its research showed many other C-suite leaders “are typically happier to remain where they are.”

“I do think having operational knowledge is essential to casting vision,” Sutton-Wallace says, “because it’s essential to understand what is required to translate your vision into operational reality. Ideally, you would have seen in an operations role what it takes to accomplish it. Achieving one’s vision requires a deep understanding of organizational culture and how to motivate and inspire those who do the work every day. My operations background has been absolutely crucial in my ability to lead.”

She’s been around healthcare long enough to have seen the opposite is true as well.

“If you don’t appreciate the impact on culture, operations and change management, you may be shocked when strategy fails,” Sutton-Wallace says. “When you overload an organization and ask it to do more than it can digest or handle at once, it functionally delays the work.

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“Good operations alone is a strategic advantage.”

#2 Clear Communication

Excellent communication is central to alignment in an organization, Sutton-Wallace adds.

“You just can’t communicate once and think you’ve been clear and that everyone understands,” she says. “You constantly have to recast vision, answering the questions of Why? And Why Now? Also, as new team members enter the organization, you must introduce these ideas clearly and succinctly in order to sustain the culture of improvement and excellence. It’s really critical to keep the goals and objectives in front of people.”

Research by Gallup confirms this. “Managers who are directly supervised by highly engaged executive teams (those in the top quartile of employee engagement) are 39% more likely to be engaged than managers who are supervised by executive teams with below-average engagement,” the study reports.

“Pam epitomizes a modern-day leader in healthcare,” notes Richard P. Shannon, MD, Executive Vice President for Health Affairs at the University of Virginia. “She is humble, yet a consummate problem solver. What matters to her is not who is right but what is right.”

To drive engagement, Sutton-Wallace took UVA’s existing set of values and had listening sessions with the organization’s managers. The theme that emerged, she says, is that “accountability” and “professionalism” were qualities that employees felt were missing from the values and wanted the medical center to accentuate, so they were added.

EXECUTIVE’S TOOLKIT: Helping women leaders with the balancing act

Pamela Sutton-Wallace is a woman of accomplishment. She spent three years working on a PhD in political science before realizing she didn’t want to spend her career in the field. So, she headed to Yale to earn a master’s degree in public health. She worked at Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina and the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer before spending 17 years working in the Duke University Health System.

It’s a great resume, but it wasn’t easy, which is why she says she feels “a tremendous calling to mentor her younger colleagues and try to give them some of the ‘keys to the kingdom,’ so to speak, and help them learn what I wished others had shared with me.”

Part of that learning, she says candidly, is the constant struggle of professional and personal life balance.

“I think women (and many men) in general fight a huge amount of guilt,” she says. “There’s so much pressure to have the perfect home life whether it’s raising children,

caring for aging parents or being the neighborhood friend while also trying to be committed and productive to health care organizations that operate 365/24/7. It often feels like a constant tradeoff, resulting in feeling like nothing is ever done well.”

Part of her counsel, she says, is to look at work-life balance in a different light.

“My advice to women is to live life in seasons,” she says. “You have a season of professional growth and development – you’re on the fast track. And then there may be seasons when you choose to focus on other priorities. At one point, I had two infants under 20 months old, and I knew that was not going to be a period of accelerated professional growth. I was lucky to get out the door with a clean suit on.

“It’s being balanced over the long run of your life as opposed to trying to be balanced every day and every hour. The true test is our ability to be self-aware and remain committed to our authentic self. This is the hallmark of executive success!”

As a result, the acronym of ASPIRE emerged:

Accountability
Stewardship
Professionalism
Integrity
Respect
Excellence

In addition, the managers sought clarity on what expected behaviors should be associated with these values. So, they crafted detailed guidelines on expected behaviors

to align with the respective values. Importantly, the UVA School of Medicine and the Faculty Practice also adopted the same values to ensure alignment across the health system. But Sutton-Wallace says her team is not quite ready “to take a victory lap.”

“It’s still early,” she says, “but I think we have put a stake in the ground. I think the journey has been important for us, and we now

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have common knowledge, common language and common expectations. These aligned values and goals create a culture whereby our team members are more engaged, able to articulate concerns they have around our processes and workflows and generally watch their hard work translate into improved outcomes for patients and their loved ones.”

Stressing the importance of accountability stems from Sutton-Wallace’s training in Lean Six Sigma, which she has brought to the frontline staff as they have improved UVA’s safety scores.

“It really has been transformational,” she says. “They are the ones who know how to deliver the care and what the processes should be. And they also know where the workarounds have been that can lead to an adverse event.”

#3 Culture of Accountability

Sutton-Wallace says the work with her team comes down to three questions that all members must

decide to answer daily:

What do we value?

How will we interact and communicate with one another?

How will we hold ourselves accountable to our decisions and outcomes?

Cultural questions like these are key concepts for executive team performance, in which leadership teams come together to create the kind of organization they aspire to be. The analogy sometimes used is that, on a bowling team, team members may be primarily concerned about their own score. But in business, like a football team, it’s important for leaders to understand their role and how it fits into the overall objective of improving the entire enterprise, not simply their department or niche.

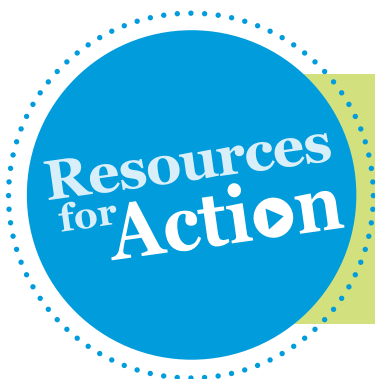
Decisions about culture, Sutton-Wallace says, are important to set the tone for the organization.

“I think the best leaders know how to create a culture of engagement where people want to come and do

good work and have the tools and resources to do so,” she says.

Sutton-Wallace also has been a champion of diversity in the leadership ranks, and Shannon notes her influence was felt in the community in the wake of the white supremacist rally a year ago last August in Charlottesville. Sutton-Wallace and her team cleared the surgical schedule, coordinated discharges and worked hard to prepare the health system and the community for injuries to police and protestors, while continuing to care for the staff at the epicenter of the unrest.

“I think it is important to view diversity not as a duty, but as a key to building an excellent organization,” Shannon says. “I think a key to that is building relationships within our local community, which Pam has done a tremendous job with. In the wake of August 12th, she continues to engage community stakeholders to assess what’s needed beyond healthcare.” **MPI**



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