

## From scratch: A tale of diversity in action

Mario Garner drives success through mirroring the community

A C-Suite Conversation with

**Mario Garner**

COO, Memorial Hermann, MH Southeast and Pearland Hospitals

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**W**hat would you do if you had the opportunity to start a hospital from scratch? How would you staff your leadership team? What type of culture would you strive to create?

Mario Garner, now the chief operating officer for two Memorial Hermann hospitals in Houston, MH Southeast, Pearland and a free-standing emergency room, has had the chance to start with a blank slate twice, and he's not even 40 yet.

In 2013, he became the CEO of New Orleans East Hospital, which was built after Hurricane Katrina decimated the neighborhood in which it is placed. And in 2015, he

moved to Texas to serve as CEO of the new Memorial Hermann Pearland Hospital.

"It was a tremendous opportunity to build a team to meet the needs of the respective communities," Garner says today. "It was a clean slate, so I did not inherit a way of doing things. I was able to spark a level of interest by being creative with the teams I was able to build at these respective campuses."

### Diversity is a must-have ingredient

In both cases, Garner made it a point to make sure his leadership teams reflected the communities they served. New Orleans East is an urban hospital in the inner city; Pearland is in a diverse suburban setting in the Houston metro area.

Diversity has been shown to be essential for successful organizations. Study after study shows that companies with diverse leadership are more successful financially, are more innovative, function better and make more deliberate decisions than those lacking diversity.

"The leadership teams at both of these de novo hospitals were able to bring innovative ideas and best practices from various other locations," he adds. "At New Orleans

East Hospital, we were able to recruit physicians fairly easily. By the time we opened the doors, we had more than 100 credentialed physicians for the campus – which spoke to the physicians' interest. Some were eager to return to the community, while others wanted to come in and serve in what was in many regards an underserved area. We also didn't have the challenges of overcoming an aged physical plant, so it was very easy to recruit."

Pearland was a bit different situation, but just as exciting, he says.

"Memorial Hermann has a methodology for operating our hospitals, so we were able to take many of those components and lay them as a foundation. Then, we were able to build on that with the unique aspect of opening a new hospital and establishing a positive culture, one that would create employee engagement, as well as engagement with our physicians and patients."

### Working effectively with the board

The unique governance structures of both hospitals also gave Garner broad experience in very different situations.

"At Memorial Hermann, I had the opportunity to work closely

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with corporate infrastructure,” he says. “I reported to a regional president who was able to provide significant guidance as to the Memorial Hermann way of hospital operations. She helped me overcome any barriers or roadblocks when it came to acquiring what I needed to execute contracts and other activation components to get the hospital open on time and under budget.”

New Orleans East was completely different. The hospital was built with grants and public funding; the board was appointed by the mayor of New Orleans.

“Our board meetings were publicly held. There were a lot of varying interests as to what the hospital would look like, the number of beds it would have, and what types of services would be offered. But we were able to open it seamlessly.”

It is incumbent on the CEO to inform, guide and nurture his or her board. While they supervise the CEO, it is the chief executive who sets the tone for the interactions with the trustees. Getting off on the right foot is important; a CEO and a board chair may have different communication styles, and it often works best for an outside observer to establish guardrails to ensure the success of the board and CEO.

### Experience counts in leadership

After a series of mergers in the spring of 2017, Garner was promoted from his CEO position at the small Pearland hospital to the larger COO role overseeing three facilities. He says his experience as a CEO at two hospitals – in addition to other COO roles earlier in his career – help him to tackle his current assignment.

“Understanding governance and

## EXECUTIVE’S TOOLKIT: Tips for young executives

As one of the most successful young leaders in healthcare, you might correctly guess that Mario Garner gets asked for advice a lot by young administrators and up-and-coming executives. While each person’s station in life will be different, Garner offers some key qualities that can help new leaders have contented lives and fulfilling careers:

**Aim for servant leadership.** “I ask other team members if I can help in any way. I don’t have a clinical license, but if there’s something I can help a staff member with at the bedside of a patient, I’m happy to do that too. I try to meet with my direct reports on their own turf. As is the case in any relationship, trust and transparency is very important and grows with time.”

**Be well-read.** “The healthcare dynamic is ever changing, as are regulations and models and way to operate efficiently. It’s important for new leaders to stay abreast of the latest advancements and the latest methods of operating in a dynamic environment.”

**Become an intrapreneur.** “I think it serves an early careerist well to find an operational domain for which he or she can become a subject-matter expert and contribute value to the organization. An intrapreneur is someone who

can optimize internal processes efficiently. Certainly, one’s ability to establish an operational niche as well as grow revenue and decrease the expenses of an organization catches the eye of the supervisor or hiring manager can propel a person to the next level in his or her career.”

**Be willing to move to a new location to advance.** “I think geographic flexibility is important. I’ve lived in seven places. Remain open to opportunities that may not exist within a specific market. But this too is a matter of personal preference. There’s nothing wrong with staying in one organization and growing there.”

**Work hard, then work harder.** “Arrive early if needed. Stay late if needed. Schedule meetings that may not be on the routine schedule if they are needed to accomplish a goal. If you want to come into this field and have an upward trajectory, go above and beyond – because we all have to do it as senior leaders.”

**Focus on others, not yourself.** “Accomplishments are great, but our ability to serve others is really the main calling and purpose for our lives. The greatest things we get to do are to serve others, so it is important for me to be grounded in my spiritual foundation; I believe that serving God and others is my calling in life.”

fiduciary management has been essential,” he says. “As a CEO, you’re responsible for the entire organizational chart, including nursing, finance, human resources and other departments. I’ve not

been limited to anything – nursing relations, board governance, managing the balance sheet – I’ve had all those levels of responsibility. A first-time COO may not have had

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that level of exposure or that level of responsibility.”

As a former CEO, Garner is able to instinctively support his own CEO with aplomb.

“As Vice President, Operations of both Memorial Hermann Southeast Hospital and Memorial Hermann Pearland, Mario is better able to look for opportunities for synergy and cross collaboration between both campuses in order to best meet the healthcare needs of the residents of the region,” says Kyle Price, SVP and CEO of Memorial Hermann Southeast and Memorial Hermann Pearland.

In our firm’s experience, one of the most difficult transitions

that executives need to make is a mindset – they need to consciously set aside the priorities of their own department or niche and focus their efforts and will on how to help the entire enterprise, or organization, reach its goals. That is the key to successful leadership development, and Garner has mastered it.

In a short time, he has become known for his abilities to make quality and safety two major premiums at the hospitals in which he’s served. When he helped to launch New Orleans East, the hospital was able to attain accreditation by The Joint Commission with commendations on the very first try. And, in the past few months, his efforts as COO helped

his facilities move from silver to gold status with The Joint Commission Stroke Center accreditation as well as maintain distinguished “Saving Lives” measures at the Pearland campus. In addition, Memorial Hermann Southeast was the only campus in Houston’s Southeast market to achieve an “A” rating in the Leapfrog Group’s annual safety ratings.

“I think the ability to quantify effectiveness in my role is important, whether it’s driving down infection rates, or improving patient satisfaction or employee engagement. It shows the effectiveness of the whole team and our entire organization.” **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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