



In collaboration with CHIME, iMethods convened a roundtable of high-level health executives to explore how healthcare organizations are fortifying their cultures to withstand current stresses and emerge stronger than ever into the future.

Moderated by CHIME President & CEO Russ Branzell

Participating CHIME members:

Yuri Campbell

Senior Director of Clinical Solutions Delivery
WellMed

Joe Diver

former CIO
Holyoke Medical Center

Pamela Landis

Senior VP
Hackensack Meridian Health

An Executive VP and CIO at one of the largest non-profit health systems in the Southwest

Bennett Cheramie

VP of Information Systems
Baton Rouge General

Deborah Gash

SVP and Chief Digital Officer
Saint Luke's Health System

SUMMARY

Healthcare is the most deeply personal, profoundly human businesses there is. And while the vast and complex \$4.5 trillion industry certainly has its share of confusing bureaucracy and calculated decision-making, person-to-person relationships are at the core of everything that a healthcare delivery network does.

That includes the way it runs its clinical, administrative, and financial operations; the way it treats its staff; and the way it positions its mission and values within the community. The business culture of a healthcare organization is the most crucial indicator of whether or not it can successfully serve patients at the most vulnerable times in their lives.

Over the past few years, healthcare organizations of all descriptions have had their cultures put to an extreme test. The COVID-19 pandemic stretched the industry to its very limit, and prompted an [unprecedented exodus of workers](#) from the field, resulting in an ongoing talent shortage that is [still putting strain](#) on care delivery today.

As a result, healthcare leaders are finding themselves competing with one another for a smaller pool of top talent with higher demands than ever. It's a buyer's market for employees, and executives are under pressure to up their game in order to attract and retain the most qualified individuals.

"When an industry is experiencing talent shortages, it can be tempting to let culture take a back seat and onboard anyone we can find simply because we need openings filled," said Clint Drawdy, CEO of iMethods. "But that's a short-term solution that can lead to long-term consequences for the organization."

"Instead, we need to view a strong, open, collaborative organizational culture as a way to attract highly qualified and dedicated employees who want to actively contribute to fulfilling the mission."

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WHAT DEFINES CULTURE IN THE HEALTHCARE ECOSYSTEM?

“Culture” can mean different things to different people, but it’s generally defined as the mission, values, standards, and expectations that drive the daily activities of a group or organization.

“The question of having a cohesive culture is complicated when your organization is newly formed like so many health systems, through a series of mergers and acquisitions,” noted Pamela Landis, Senior VP at Hackensack Meridian Health in New Jersey. “Here at HMH, we’ve been very purposeful in not perpetuating the old way of getting things done but inviting people from all over the company to build a new network. It’s hard work, but when you put it in the hands of people who are actually delivering and managing the care, you unleash a lot of creativity and cooperation.”

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Senior VP
Hackensack Meridian Health

“COVID was a real test of our success,” she added. “As terrible as it was, there was something beautiful in the way everyone came together to work toward a single purpose. We leaned into our vaccination program, which reached nearly a million people in New Jersey. I’m so proud of how it strengthened us and made us see the power of working together toward shared goals.”

A shared mission is critical for creating a sense of purpose and buy-in across the entire enterprise, agreed Joe Diver, CIO at Holyoke Medical Center in Western Massachusetts.

“Culture is about feeling like you are part of the process of success,” he said. It’s about innovation for the community and service to your colleagues as well as to the health system’s patients. As a leader, you must keep those concepts in the center of your mission in the present and your vision for the future.”

For Yuri Campbell, Senior Director of Clinical Solutions Delivery at WellMed, it’s all about informed collaboration.

“Because we’re in a value-based model, our culture is centered on the efficiency and effectiveness of care,” he said, sharing his own personal perspectives in the roundtable, not those of WellMed or its parent company UnitedHealth Group. “Everyone has to be empowered to do what is most important for the patient at each moment in their journey. A strong culture has to be built around creating the right conditions for that to happen and reflecting our shared values in what we do every day.”
sit down at my desk, I’ve got a draft note,” he said. “It literally takes a few seconds for the computer to do its thing and present that draft to me.”

BALANCING FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST IN A MODERN WORK ENVIRONMENT

Since the acute phase of the COVID crisis ended, the corporate culture debate has centered on return to office policies. Leaders have largely struggled to answer questions about why their teams should go back to the pre-pandemic way of working, and [hybrid or fully remote options](#) are becoming a baseline requirement for more white collar knowledge workers.

A THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE

Competing for Talent: Leveraging Culture as a Differentiator in the Healthcare Environment



DIGITAL HEALTH LEADERS

“It’s important not to position it as a demand to return to work just because we want you to, but to find ways that make people want to come back to the office by making it easier and more satisfying to do their jobs in person,” said Bennett Cheramie, VP of Information Systems at Baton Rouge General. “I can’t stress enough the importance of having the right leaders who understand how to communicate that message, otherwise you’ll see the turnover churn really badly.”

One provider took a team-by-team approach.

“When it was safe to start thinking about coming back to the office, we basically left it up to each senior executive leading a team to determine if they wanted to be all in-house, all remote, or hybrid,” said an executive VP and CIO at one of the largest non-profit health systems in the Southwest. “Almost every group chose a hybrid model, because it does provide a degree of flexibility that talented people are looking for.”

Balance, flexibility, and trust are key to making hybrid or remote work a success in the healthcare setting, said Deborah Gash, SVP and Chief Digital Officer at Saint Luke’s Health System in Idaho.

“The challenge is merging how we function as an organization and how each person likes to work,” she stated. “Most people won’t perform at their best if they don’t feel that the organization resonates with their personal goals.”

“It’s taken a while to get some of my managers on board with the idea that as long as the work is getting done to a high standard, it doesn’t necessarily have to happen within a traditional 9-5 with the employees in their cubicles. We are very careful to ensure that our employees are doing what they need to do, but we also have to have some trust in our people that they can be professional and responsible.”

CRAFTING A CULTURE OF OPENNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Creating a positive, engaging environment for employees requires senior leaders to get hands-on with building and maintaining organizational culture.

“As leaders, we have to be fully committed to a culture of safety, empathy, and listening so we can maintain the trust of our team and our patients,” stressed Diver. “A great example came through our nurse council. We have coffee and snacks that go out to all the units, but there was no hot coffee in behavioral health because of patient safety concerns. And even though it seems like a small thing, the nurses on the unit felt like they were being treated differently and it was sapping morale. We wouldn’t have known about it without that willingness for senior leaders to take concerns seriously, no matter what they are.”

Whether the issues are centered on one team or spread across the enterprise, executives have to take a structured and coordinated approach to gauging the impact of their interventions, pointed out Campbell.

“There are plenty of metrics for the hard ROI of a new initiative, but we also have to look at the soft ROI. Measuring both those things keeps leadership accountable for staying synched with our culture, and it also helps us make future decisions,” he said.

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CRAFTING A CULTURE OF OPENNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY CONTINUED

“We’ll use Net Promoter Scores (NPS) and other methods to monitor metrics like how patients perceive differences in their experiences, or how staff feel about efforts to reduce clicks in the EMR or implement time-saving workflows. Are we actually getting our time back? Are we really making a difference? Accountability is looking at the facts and pivoting, if necessary, so that we actually achieve our goals.”

Measurement supports accountability and allows for leaders to make adjustments quickly when something isn’t having the desired impact, added Landis. That’s crucial to demonstrating that leaders are committed to solving problems.

“It’s one thing to say that we have a great culture, but it’s another thing to enable your team to hold your leaders accountable for enacting meaningful changes,” she said. “People need to feel like their leaders are actually going to help them clear the barriers. That’s what culture boils down to. Are we there to be obstacles, or are we there to be facilitators? And how well do we accept feedback and implement change when we get called out for being on the wrong side of the divide?”

PRESERVING CULTURE WHILE BUILDING RESILIENT, DYNAMIC TEAMS

Healthcare organizations are eager to fill vacancies and accelerate innovation by bringing in new talent to their teams, but they must be careful about maintaining their culture while simultaneously taking advantage of an influx of new thinking.

Adding new team members, especially when existing staff feel on the edge of burnout, is a complex activity that requires deep insight into people and their personalities.

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“I am a huge fan of referrals, because I trust my team and my network,” said the executive VP and CIO at one of the largest non-profit health systems in the Southwest. “If you’re someone that my team member is actively trying to work with again, that speaks volumes about your character, your abilities, and your likelihood of complementing what we already have.”

The right “soft skills” are a top priority for most executives, even when they’re under pressure to get positions filled.

“Technical skills are important, obviously, but we also focus very much on behaviors and motivations, and we definitely prioritize soft skills in addition to subject-matter experience,” said Gash. “I want to know what they think makes a great environment to work in. I want to know what they do outside of work, how they interact with their community, and what they value, because those are going to be predictors of how well they blend with our team and champion our culture.”

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Cheramie agreed that personality and relationship skills are extremely important for building better teams. “You might be a rock star in your technical area, but if you don’t have the right soft skills, you’re not going to gain respect on your own team or on the teams you have to work with,” he said.

“Even if you’re desperate for technical talent, don’t lose sight of the fact that we are all people and we need to trust and like the folks we work with. Otherwise, the bonds that hold your teams together are going to start to dissolve.”

IN CONCLUSION

Healthcare executives are likely to be coping with talent shortages for some time, but they aren’t helpless against the dynamics of a large and unpredictable market. Instead, they can make their organizations into a talent destination by focusing on building and maintaining an attractive, responsive, and accountable culture across the entire health system.

Doing so is the best way to stand out to new applicants while holistically supporting existing team members in their shared goals to serve their communities to the highest standard.

“People are the most important resource we have,” concluded Campbell. “If we want to be innovative and meet the expectations of our patients, we have to be clear about our intentions with establishing and maintaining our values internally and externally. Illustrating that every day is how to compete for the talent you want to keep. We need to lean into culture even more in the current environment, not less, so that we can strengthen our organizations for the future and continue to thrive.”

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