How to Promote Diversity in Executive Healthcare Leadership

Learn how to foster inclusive advancement so you'll bring the most qualified senior leaders on board.
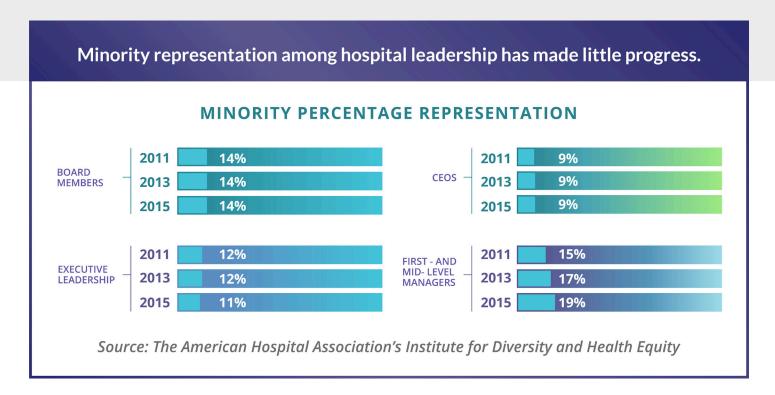
According to the American College of Healthcare Executives, 89% of hospital CEOs are white, in contrast to just 60% of the entire U.S. population.[1] Minority women hold only 3% of all healthcare C-suite positions, assert M. Jane Fitzsimmons and Angelleen Peters-Lewis in an article published in March 2021 in The Voice of Nursing Leadership.[2] Further, minorities make up a third of all hospital patients (a percentage that is growing consistently).[3] This means senior leaders too often do not thoroughly understand the distinct cultures, needs, and barriers to healthcare faced by the patients they serve, which can undermine the quality of care provided by their organizations.[4] Systemic racism in healthcare is thus a critical problem that affects the lives of countless patients.

Achieving equity in healthcare hinges on the ability to foster inclusive practices in executive healthcare leadership, as the American Hospital Association asserts.[5] As the C-suite of healthcare leadership becomes more diverse, patients will be better served because those with decision-making power will be positioned to help remove the barriers to healthcare that they face. Organizations with diverse executive leadership outperform their competition by 36%, McKinsey & Co. has found.[6] Increasing inclusivity is a win-win-win for patients, leaders, and the organization as a whole.

Healthcare leaders have the responsibility to take an active role in advancing the careers of diverse candidates who are qualified for high-level positions. We will examine how to foster inclusive search processes and career advancement strategies for executive healthcare leadership so your organization can be part of the solution to this critical challenge.

Minority representation among hospital leadership has made little progress.

MINORITY PERCENTAGE REPRESENTATION

BOARD MEMBERS
- 2011: 14%
- 2013: 14%
- 2015: 14%

CEOS
- 2011: 9%
- 2013: 9%
- 2015: 9%

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP
- 2011: 12%
- 2013: 12%
- 2015: 11%

FIRST - AND MID- LEVEL MANAGERS
- 2011: 15%
- 2013: 17%
- 2015: 19%

Source: The American Hospital Association's Institute for Diversity and Health Equity

1. American College of Healthcare Executives, "Increasing and Sustaining Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Healthcare Leadership" https://www.ache.org/about-ache/our-story/our-commitments/policy-statements/increasing-and-sustaining-racial-diversity-in-healthcare-management

2. Fitzsimmons J, Peters-Lewis A. "Creating More Diverse C-Suites: From Intention to Outcomes," The Voice of Nursing Leadership, 2021, American Organization of Nurse Leadership.

3. Shelby Livingston, "Racism Is Still a Problem in Healthcare's C-Suite," Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26554292?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

4. Kirby Bates, "Building Cultural Competence in Healthcare Organizations." https://kirbybates.com/blog/building-cultural-competence-in-healthcare-organizations/

5. American Hospital Association, "Diverse and Inclusive Hiring Is Central to Health Equity" https://www.aha.org/news/blog/2019-10-17-diverse-and-inclusive-hiring-central-health-equity

6. McKinsey & Co., "Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters" https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters

TAKING ACTION TO BUILD INCLUSIVE EXECUTIVE SEARCH PROCESSES.

Without consciously working to develop inclusive search strategies, an organization's recruitment will be influenced by bias. In their research, Fitzsimmons and Peters-Lewis conducted a survey that asked successful, diverse nursing executives and senior leaders to specify what they viewed as the three main barriers
hindering their career advancement.

Three primary issues emerged from their findings:

- Uneven access to career-building opportunities
- Lack of mentors and sponsors
- Inadequate opportunities to engage in career-building experiences

"Of those who experienced racism, 100% believed the barriers become increasingly prevalent when advancing to the executive level," say the authors. Numerous respondents felt that minority candidates must demonstrate that they far exceed the credentials and experience required for the position in order to advance, and many note that they have witnessed white candidates receiving a position for which they were less qualified than diverse candidates.

Organizations must take action to correct these disparities in order to become more diverse. The following executive search strategies will help organizations prioritize inclusiveness within both external and internal search processes.[7] Fostering objectivity every step of the way will help institutions to target the right candidates and impress them with the thoughtfulness put into the recruitment process.

1. HIGHLIGHTING WHAT THE POSITION AND ORGANIZATION CAN OFFER.

Make the job attractive to minority candidates, women, gender-nonconforming people, and other recruits by making sure salary is on par with that of majority race males.

In the job descriptions, show that the organization prioritizes authenticity and values diversity not just because it is the right thing to do but because it helps them proactively improve. Articulately expressing why they are committed to diversity will show that they genuinely value it.

Be vocal about the institution's commitment to healthcare diversity. Volunteer to speak at networking events for DEI-related coalitions and professional associations. Publish content about the benefits of inclusivity, such as establishing a robust body of literature that explains the institution's reasons for investing in diversity will make a strong impression on candidates.

2. DEFINING QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE ROLE.

Reconsider the job qualifications. Articulate measurable, objective criteria for the role, including skills and personal characteristics. Don't base hiring decisions on "likeability" or "culture fit," as they tend to lead to hiring people from the dominant background.

Challenge the recruiting team to identify a diverse pool of executive-level applicants. Strive to align the diversity of the institution's executive leadership with that of its patient base to engender cultural understanding. Job descriptions might also mention that a strong understanding of that particular culture (or language, if applicable) would be a tremendous asset.

3. ASSEMBLING AN INCLUSIVITY TEAM TO HANDLE RECRUITMENT.

Create an inclusivity council that is as diverse as possible to manage the executive search process collectively, as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) advises.[8] The council can take ownership of identifying and eradicating implicit biases.

Make sure the recruiters, interviewers, and other company representatives are culturally sensitive and from diverse backgrounds. Because they will serve as the face of the organization for candidates, they need to reflect its commitment to inclusivity.

Partner with a firm that understands how to achieve diversity in healthcare leadership.

Outside consultants can often pinpoint areas for growth that are difficult to detect from within. Work with a search firm focused on executive-level recruiting that can provide access to the top talent in the field.

4. MODIFYING THE INTERVIEWING APPROACH.

Consider using a blinded resume review process so that hiring managers will not unintentionally prioritize certain candidates based on name, gender and presumed ethnicity. This can involve reviewing a reformatted resume along with the candidate's written responses to questions specific to the role.

Hold a kick-off meeting with the interview team to reiterate the predefined criteria for the role, as well as the desired leadership style and values. Discuss unconscious bias with the team.

Craft interview questions that directly relate to the objective criteria that have been defined for the position. A well-defined set of interview questions and guidelines assures that every candidate participates in a consistent interview process so that no one is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by personal bias.[9]

Give each interviewee the same guidance on how to prepare for interviews. If a particular candidate has insider knowledge because they have a personal contact at the institution, they will have an unfair advantage—unless everyone receives the same insider knowledge.

Hold multiple short interviews with different interviewers so one person's implicit bias does not prevent the organization from identifying the best candidates.[10]

Use the criteria-based interview questions to develop a scoring system that will help the recruiting team make its decision as objectively as possible. This evaluation tool will help the team avoid acting on implicit bias.

5. ADVERTISING WITH PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS.

Advertise jobs with professional associations geared toward diversity, posting senior-level healthcare jobs with organizations like the National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives (NALHE) and the Institute for Diversity in Health Equity (IFDHE). Browse through their member databases if possible to seek out potential candidates, reviewing resumes or profiles to find strong matches.

Thinking longer-term: Preparing the next leaders for advancement.

Promoting diversity begins long before the search for a new executive. By inclusively nurturing the growth of aspiring leaders, an organization will build a diverse pipeline of talented candidates who are ready for advancement. Each of these strategies will help institutions to grow and leverage their organization's diverse healthcare talent.

Strive to provide mentors—and, more importantly, sponsors—to every aspiring leader.[11] Having a mentor from the dominant culture can help a rising minority leader to learn the unspoken rules of that culture so they can effectively navigate it. Mentors and sponsors provide personalized support and help build the confidence that prepares healthcare leaders for the next level. Sponsors will also advocate for them and make their talents known, aiding in the search process. Create a formal sponsorship program with clear guidelines that encourage cross-demographic partnerships, as Fitzsimmons and Peters-Lewis advise.

Give budding minority leaders opportunities to "work beyond their position," Fitzsimmons and Peters-Lewis urge. Often their white counterparts receive more chances to demonstrate their leadership abilities through higher-level endeavors. For example, chairing a council, attending a conference, delivering a presentation, or taking on interprofessional roles can provide invaluable experience. This both prepares them for a higher-level position and makes them more visible to those with decision-making authority.

10. The Society for Human Resource Management, "7 Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process" https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/7-practical-ways-to-reduce-bias-in-your-hiring-process.aspx

11. Diversity Jobs, "The Role of Talent Acquisition in Driving Organizational Diversity" https://www.diversityjobs.com/2019/10/talent-acquisition-organizational-diversity/shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0418/pages/6-steps-for-building-an-inclusive-workplace.aspx

Develop and disseminate objective criteria for advancement to let aspiring leaders know what skills and qualities to focus on cultivating.

Conduct implicit bias training, as the SHRM advises, and educate the hiring committee and other staff on structured organizational racism in healthcare.[12]

Use employee surveys to identify organizational barriers to advancement from the perspective of diverse leaders so the recruiting team and organizational leadership can understand and address them.

Talk openly about the benefits and critical need for increasing diversity among organizational leadership. Involve board members and leaders in this ongoing conversation and create objective, measurable metrics for tracking progress in diversity initiatives.

Taking each of these steps will help a healthcare institution to identify, develop, and retain diverse leaders who are ready for advancement to the executive level.

By prioritizing inclusion within the existing staff, the institution will better position itself to enhance the diversity of its C-suite.

Designing a process that is driven by objective criteria and keeps implicit bias in check will help ensure that a recruiting team selects the most qualified candidates for high-level roles. An organization will thrive as it opens doors for the most talented leaders rather than only those who fit one particular mold. In turn, it will provide a higher quality of service to the patients who depend on it for their healthcare.

12. Kirby Bates, "Diversity in Healthcare Leadership: Breaking the Glass Ceiling" https://kirbybates.com/blog/diversity-healthcare-leadership-breaking-the-glass-ceiling/

13. The Society for Human Resource Management, "Implicit Bias Resource Guide" https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/resources-articles-workplace-bias. .aspx