

Tips for Finding Executive Talent for Rural Healthcare Providers

The following scenario is one that any rural health care provider dreads but is crucial for the organization to carefully consider as it plans for the future.

The CEO resigns. He has been with the hospital/clinic for many years. The governing Board of Directors is taken by surprise at the resignation. The Board was so comfortable with the CEO that it never planned for new leadership. Simply put, there is no succession plan.

With the departure of a CEO or other C-suite executive, an organization faces difficult challenges in finding a top-talent replacement.

Rural health care organizations have their own set of issues when seeking executive talent. It is important to find someone who will align personally and professionally not only within the organization but with the community as well. The process begins with an evaluation of what it means to be a health care executive in a rural setting.



The process starts with an organizational assessment.

Being a small provider does not mean you cannot think big. Large providers typically begin their search process with an organizational assessment, which provides the framework for the search. The same holds true for smaller providers. Oftentimes, an experienced consultant is called upon to take the lead in identifying and developing how to communicate the provider's mission, operations, strategic direction, challenges, and opportunities. To attract the best-qualified candidates, be realistic regarding what your organization and the community truly have to offer.

Begin your search.

Using the organizational assessment, the search committee can begin seeking a candidate with the skill sets necessary to continue the organization's strategic direction. For best results, the search committee should assemble a five-to-seven-member search team. A larger group can slow the process, while a smaller group might not represent a cross-section of views.

Find a good fit.

While academic degrees and professional designations should be considered, it is equally important to find a "people person" capable of building strong community relationships. A small community means the executive could likely see patients, board members, hospital staff and administrators daily. The executive will be your organization's representative of the hospital and expected to have a presence at civic organizations, charity events, and other groups serving the community.

Leverage your network.

Board members might not be connected to the health care community beyond their own organization. In that situation, it will pay dividends to call upon the expertise of a seasoned search consultant who understands rural health care, has a strong network, and can reach out to a regional and national network of professionals. Simply posting a "help wanted" ad won't bring in the best-qualified candidates.

Hire interim leadership to fill vacancies.

Because a successful search may take several months, and typically health care organizations cannot effectively operate without C-suite leadership, the Board of Directors should consider hiring an interim executive. By placing a proven interim executive on site will pave the way to an orderly succession, allow the organization to maintain its strategic direction, and sustain uninterrupted daily operations. The placement of an interim executive can prevent the organization from making a mistake in hastily filling a permanent position with someone who may not be the best candidate in the long term. Avoid any false signals or misunderstanding by using the term "interim CEO," which accurately describes the temporary position.

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