Surviving and thriving under a new director of pharmacy

In recent years, uncertainty in healthcare reform has been a driving force for senior health-system leadership to design more efficient patient care delivery systems. Increased demands and pressures on the director of pharmacy in this environment include an essential need for proactive information exchange at senior levels of the organization, critical business and clinical decision-making surrounding pharmacy services, integration of novel quality and safety efforts, and modernization of complex technology and automation. As a result, some health systems have experienced turnover within the director of pharmacy ranks as incumbent pharmacy leaders have taken their talents elsewhere or do not rise to the challenge, while others have retired. A pharmacy leader with a proven track record will ultimately earn the opportunity to fill a vacant director of pharmacy position.

The new director of pharmacy will begin to assess departmental needs and integrate expectations conveyed by the hospital leadership, which will have an impact on middle pharmacy managers. A sense of urgency to create results will be established, strategic priorities will be evaluated and reprioritized, the department organizational structure will evolve with new reporting relationships and positions, individuals the new director of pharmacy trusts may be recruited, and existing team members with a differing vision may pursue other career opportunities. The purpose of this article is to share teachings described in the literature, annotated with practical experience, to help middle pharmacy managers survive and thrive under a new director of pharmacy.

**First steps.** An excellent first impression and positive relationship with the new director of pharmacy are vital. Research based on interviews of new chief executives found that these individuals make final determinations of their supporting leadership within 60 days, even after publicly stating that this process would take longer. Prior to the new director of pharmacy’s start date, research his or her background, experience, expertise, and network. In addition, review what your team learned about this individual during the interview process. In a calculated approach, discover and prepare to discuss mutual commonalities with the new director of pharmacy. During your introduction, after sharing the story of who you are and describing your value to the team, mutual commonalities may be leveraged to create a more personal connection.

Your relationship with the new director of pharmacy will be built upon a series of conversations covering subjects such as situational diagnosis, expectations, style, resources, and personal development. Be prepared to introduce a well-considered point of view and cover fundamental subjects in each topic area.

**Topic 1: Situational diagnosis.** Within a conversation focused on situational diagnosis, you will help mold how the new director of pharmacy views the current business situation in your pharmacy department. Know that he or she will already have been provided the executive leadership’s insight and performed independent research on department priorities, metrics, operations, finances, quality and safety initiatives, and people. As objectively as possible, volunteer information on the historical and current internal and external forces that have shaped these factors (in your opinion). What have been the greatest pharmacy successes and failures in executing annual operating plan initiatives? Who are the need-to-know pharmacy advocates and opponents in the organization?

**Topic 2: Expectations.** How your and the team’s success will be defined are discussed in a conversation focused on expectations. Learn about the new director of pharmacy’s agenda, including what the organization expects of him or her in the short, medium, and long term. Ask how the new director of pharmacy’s own performance will be measured and, more importantly, how your performance will be measured. Be upfront, transparent, and honest regarding your
current strengths and capacity to support or contest the new director’s stated goals. Work with other team members to collectively identify low-effort and high-impact initiatives, deliver well-timed results, and circle back for positive reinforcement to celebrate early wins.

**Topic 3: Management style.** The new director of pharmacy will have a proven track record of success and a personal management style that has largely led to the attainment of the director position. It is wise to conform to his or her style rather than trying to impose yours. In a conversation about management style, listen carefully to learn how to best interact and communicate with the new director of pharmacy. Ascertain both forthright and subtle preferences, such as how the new director should be contacted for urgent business and patient care needs (e.g., a page, a text message, a phone call, an e-mail). Agree on a one-on-one meeting schedule, ideally no less than monthly (especially early in your relationship). Perform ongoing self-reflection on differences in style and consider how you can adapt yours to achieve a better fit.

**Topic 4: Resources.** Identify background and information, human resources, training, technology and automation, and other means necessary to successfully execute on existing and newly established expectations. Be prepared to detail these in a conversation about resources. Refresh your negotiation skills, with specific emphasis on developing a fact base, determining the best alternative to a completely successful negotiated agreement (i.e., what you could get if you are not fully satisfied with the outcome), practicing what you will say and how you will say it, and avoiding confrontation. Consider how the new director of pharmacy may receive your requests, and anticipate what questions will be asked and how you will answer those questions to bolster your justification. Use the expectations conversation to detail anticipated consequences if you are not provided with appropriate tools and resources.

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**Topic 5: Personal development.** Lastly, keep your professional growth goals and the impending benefits of contributing to the new director of pharmacy’s agenda in the forefront of your mind during a conversation regarding personal development. Be mindful that the new director of pharmacy may be more or less liberal than a predecessor with regard to support of additional education and training, such as department-sponsored tuition assistance and conference attendance. The new director of pharmacy is positioned to increase your organizational visibility through delegation of new projects or initiatives. Confer with departmental colleagues to judge how these new projects or initiatives will shape your career paths. During this conversation, also assess and take advantage of the new director of pharmacy’s interest in becoming your sponsor, mentor, or coach.

**Other recommendations.** In addition to the tips provided above, advice in the literature suggests that to survive and thrive under the new director of pharmacy, the middle pharmacy manager should show goodwill, avoid dwelling on bygone fortunes or hardships, and make visible his or her top attitude and abilities.¹

Starting on day 1, the new director of pharmacy will seek confirmation of the middle pharmacy manager’s readiness to contribute to the new team. While it may be human nature to remain cautious and reserved in the face of all the aforesaid forthcoming changes, making your intention and ownership of the new vision known to the director of pharmacy is worthwhile. This is best accomplished with direct intent, through spoken communication indicating your understanding and appreciation of what is to come at a time when you have the new director of pharmacy’s full attention.

As a middle pharmacy manager, you may have had good fortune and a favorable relationship with the previous director of pharmacy. Avoid exhibiting feelings of remorse and loss during the transition, and give the new director of pharmacy the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he or she, too, can create a strong, favorable impression and appreciation of the new director’s vision, a patient and objective approach to broaching the subject of past hardships, and efforts to make a strong, favorable early impression.

**Closing notes.** Working for and alongside a new director of pharmacy during a successful career in health-system pharmacy is an exciting opportunity for the middle pharmacy manager. In summary, the middle pharmacy manager’s ability to survive and thrive will be dependent on positive relationship development through a series of conversations on key topics, demonstrated visible ownership and appreciation of the new director’s vision, a patient and objective approach to broaching the subject of past hardships, and efforts to make a strong, favorable early impression.

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