

Six ways to get a grip on your first health education leadership role

Six conseils pour bien réussir votre première expérience de leadership en éducation médicale

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Abstract

Entering into health education leadership with clear intentions can help guide a new career. While being asked, or simply considering, an educational leadership position is exciting, it is important to consider your motivation for this position and how this position will mesh with your life and what you want to achieve in this position. In addition, it is important to look to mentors for advice and consider other avenues of professional development. Our six tips provide insight into the consideration, negotiation and selection of a health education leadership career that can yield numerous rewards both personally and professionally.

Résumé

Pour mieux s'orienter dans une nouvelle carrière, il est utile d'être lucide sur ses intentions lorsqu'on assume pour la première fois un rôle de leadership en éducation médicale. Bien qu'envisager ou se faire proposer un poste de leadership dans le domaine de l'éducation soit en soi palpitant, il est néanmoins essentiel de s'interroger sur sa motivation pour le poste, sur la manière de l'intégrer dans sa vie et sur ce qu'on souhaite réaliser dans cette fonction. En outre, il est important de se faire conseiller par des mentors et d'explorer d'autres possibilités de développement professionnel. Les six conseils qu'on propose touchent à l'examen, à la négociation et au choix d'une carrière de leadership en éducation médicale, qui peut apporter de nombreuses récompenses tant sur le plan personnel que sur le plan professionnel.

Introduction

The number of choices for entry level health educational leadership roles can be overwhelming. New graduates as well as health professionals established in their careers are often recruited for positions that may, or may not, support their professional and personal goals.¹ In this article, we share some advice for those considering taking on a new role in health education leadership.

Tip 1: Examine the motivation from multiple perspectives.

Environmental pressure

Often, there is a sense of urgency when a potential candidate is being recruited for an educational leadership

role. However, what appears to be a significant “one-time-only” leadership opportunity is likely to arise again. Take your time to think about this prospective role. While it may feel that taking time to consider this position could mean that this position will pass you by, it is helpful to monitor your institution’s educational leadership positions that are advertised so you can accurately assess how frequently these, or similar positions, are offered.

External interest

When you are approached by someone in a leadership role to take on a position, ask yourself if the person recruiting you is genuinely interested in you as a person, your career advancement, or supporting the further development of your skillset—do they have your best interests at heart? It

is flattering to be asked to fill a role, but if you are solving an institutional problem or if you don't have the resources to succeed in this role, this position may not be right for you. Are you being asked to fill this role because of the value you would bring to the role, or are those offering you the position feeling pressure to address a problem and you are a convenient solution?

Internal motivation

Does this position spark joy and excitement in you? Teaching learners on the wards or in small groups is a very different experience from taking on a role in education leadership. These leadership positions can be administratively heavy compared to front line teaching jobs and removed from the excitement of teaching. Health educational leadership roles are not typically remunerated as well as clinical roles so the rewards are rarely monetary.²⁻⁴ What kind of rewards will this position confer—will you have the opportunity to update a pedagogical approach, renew the curriculum or work with an exciting team? Educational leadership roles can also allow you to be part of an important mission or connecting to a higher purpose.⁵ Additional significant benefits include working with and learning from mentors, supporting learners as well as seeing the excitement learners bring to you and the discipline.⁶ Recognition, awards and personal achievement can also be decidedly motivating.

Tip 2: Will this position mesh with your life?

Your schedule

Flexible and part-time work is attractive, particularly for those trying to balance clinical duties.⁷ In addition to clinical duties, many individuals are trying to balance outside activities and family schedules.^{1,2,8} Sit down and think honestly about how much “spare time” and additional energy you have. What about the time required for hobbies, important social ties or simply resting—would any of these or other important activities be compromised? Would you have the time and energy to commit to the new position to provide the quality of work you would want, or need, to provide?

Determine if the work is seasonal – are certain school terms busier than others? How much time on average will you need per week, or day? Is there flexibility in scheduling? Are there certain fixed commitments like seminars or meetings? How much notice will you be given to adjust your clinical or other schedules?

Anticipate that you will likely be spending more time in the first months of your position building rapport and trust with your team and learning the scope and detail of the job. In addition, you should attend most meetings you are invited to initially, in order to better learn which invites are important.

It is also important to look at the logistics of salaried positions. Does a 20% position actually equal one day a week average over the year or will you be spending more time than you are paid for? Will your travel expenses be compensated? Other issues you should consider range from the tax implications of your position, what benefits are included and if your position will lead to any conflicts of interest between the university and your other employer(s).

Your location

COVID-19 has changed the way we work, with remote work now common.⁹ With remote work comes challenges such as structure to your day, connection to your team, intrapersonal connections with peers and the capacity to place boundaries on your availability. There are also affordances of flexibility, not having to commute and positions in locations that may not have been possible previously.

Tip 3: Does it suit your personality?

Your tolerance

Find out what your “passion to chore index” is. It is unlikely any job will support your passions 100%. For some, if 20% of the job creates or supports your passion and is enlivening to you, then the other 80% is tolerable as it allows or supports that vivifying 20%. For others, the index is 30:70—ask yourself if this job has the right mix for you. It is important to appreciate that it is rare for a position to sit 100% (or even 60%) in the passion domain.

Another area of tolerance for you to assess is your ability to allow ambiguity. You may not be familiar with the role, the other players, the larger institutional reporting structure, or even what the job is really like (beyond the formal job description). By speaking to past leaders, as well as current administrative staff, you can explore this issue of uncertainty and assess your comfort with the “unknowns” of the position. It is important to determine what the Faculty's vision is for the curriculum or course you will be leading. In addition, it can be helpful to find out what past issues have, or have not been, dealt with by past leaders. Lastly, what will your reporting relationship be: will you

have performance reviews, will you have, or do you want management and oversight of your leadership role?

Your fit

Administrators are the backbone of most programs and will be vital to your success in any new position. As a potential new education leader, this work can involve managing and assigning tasks, evaluating staff performance and giving feedback—are you ready to do this?

Staff who have been in their position for a long time can indicate a positive workplace culture that limits turnover and therefore can provide significant institutional memory that can support you in your position. The downside of joining a team with long serving staff is that they may demonstrate rigidity in decision making because things have “always been done this way” or we “tried that before and it didn’t work.” Exploring the reputation staff have for supporting past leaders can give you a sense of the context you are entering.

When considering a position, ask to meet the team you will be working with. Are they a supportive and highly functioning team?² Are the team’s expectations congruent with your own leadership style? If you are taking over a position, invite the previous incumbent out for coffee and determine what the transition will be like—are they available to help answer your questions and how willing are they to share personal files and documents?

If this is a new position, ask some individuals in the unit why the position was created and what the expectations are. If there was a problem or gap that this position is intended to address, is there a concrete vision and are there funds to support this vision or does leadership want you to simply “fix things”? Ask to see the budget: does it appear appropriate. Determine the process to request funding and the chance of receiving a successful budget request. Lastly, in academic settings there can be a perception of excessive bureaucracy: are you willing to tolerate this?²

Tip 4: Figure out, what exactly it is you want to achieve in this position.

There is no one defined career pathway in health education.^{5,10} Educators may question what the “right” first position in this field should be. It is helpful to examine what values may be driving you towards this potential role. Is there a particular political or educational motivation that is compelling you? Will this position help you to achieve these goals? Are your new potential leaders supportive of your vision, and similarly do you support their vision?

Tip 5: Setting boundaries: learn how to say “no.”

Recognize that you are interviewing the committee as well as they are interviewing you.

Arguably, learning to say “no” is the most important tip of all. Saying “no” allows you to not accept a position that you do not have capacity for, does not interest you, or does not support your career.

You should not have to decide on a position right away and if you are feeling pressured to give an answer, this pressure may be a red flag. Let the hiring committee know you would like some time to think. Saying “no” does not need to be accompanied by an apology. Simply stating “On reflection this is not the right time for me to take on this position” may be a helpful phrase. Don’t feel obliged to disclose the reason for turning down the job unless you wish to enter into a discussion of how the institution can address your concerns. Recognize that saying “no” to one position likely does not preclude you from taking on another position immediately or in the future.¹¹

On the other hand, say an enthusiastic “yes” when you are able to. Be ready to negotiate for what you would need to be successful in the position. A good tactic to take is to seek supports or changes (budget, work hours, or support to attend educational conferences, etc.) you feel you will need to succeed in the job—this focuses the discussion on the job’s “needs” and not on your personal needs. Be ready to politely say “no” if appropriate supports can’t be met, as you need these supports to do a good job, and that is your primary focus. If you are not sure about the position, perhaps you can negotiate an interim role for a short period of time (6-12 months) before signing a full-term contract.

Tip 6: Utilize mentors and educate yourself.

Throughout the process of considering a leadership position, think about your long-term career in light of this role. A mentor or coach can be invaluable in not only navigating your entry into health educational leadership, but also guiding the way for decisions and future opportunities.^{5,10-13} Mentors with shared professional and personal values are an asset, particularly for those who have had to balance multiple roles and have faced institutional or cultural barriers.^{1,4,7,8} There are also age and generational differences that one needs to consider as these values often differ with regards to work-life balance

and remuneration expectations between older and younger leaders.³

Mentors can also give you advice on specific educational experiences, outside of clinical work, that can support your leadership aspirations.^{2,4} By attending faculty development sessions, workshops, webinars, and conferences focused on education, you can build a network of health education colleagues as well as develop additional leadership and pedagogical skills and knowledge.⁸ Subscribing as a reader to journals that address educational leadership topics can also support your personal development. Lastly, a formal education program in health professions education can accelerate your preparation for this or other leadership roles.¹¹

Conclusions

Entering into health education leadership can be a spontaneous and unsystematically considered process.⁵ We hope we have outlined a more intentional method for considering and obtaining a leadership role in this field. Considering your motivation for this position, how this position will mesh with your life and what you want to achieve in this position will help you make a more informed decision. Finally, being purposeful about accepting or rejecting a position can set you up for future success and future opportunities. The rewards in health professions education leadership are wide ranging and can be numerous over a career. Our six tips provide insight into the consideration and selection of a health education leadership career that can support you both personally and professionally.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no declarations of interest to report

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