



Rand O'Leary, FACHE

## Where's the Fire?

*What to do when every issue seems urgent.*

The pandemic has required hospital CEOs to put certain priorities on the back burner so they could effectively respond to their communities' needs and ensure staff members' safety. As healthcare organizations emerge from crisis mode, however, it is clear that a lack of focus on pre-pandemic priorities has had a steep cost to these organizations and created new challenges. Healthcare leaders now face the daunting task of leading their teams in a new environment and with an overwhelming number of concerns that need to be addressed.

*With many urgent issues calling for their attention, leaders should aim to discern among—and clearly communicate to each member of their organizations—which few priorities should receive their focus.*

With many urgent issues calling for their attention, leaders should aim to discern among—and clearly communicate to each member of their organizations—which few priorities should receive their focus. For healthcare organizations to continue

to serve their communities effectively, they must prioritize supporting their communities and staff, patient safety and quality, financial growth, and operational excellence. Following is advice for how leaders can stay focused on what matters most so they can deepen their impact on their organizations and communities.

### Community Support

It's important for hospitals and health systems to understand that though communities are no longer in pandemic crisis mode, they are still struggling. Communities are navigating challenges such as lack of available mental health services, changes within their homeless populations, an unstable food supply, increased crime and the subsequent strain on local police departments, and an economic downturn exacerbated by businesses that closed during the pandemic but could not reopen.

Often, hospitals are one of the largest employers in a community and are deeply connected to its economic health. Yet health systems are more than mere economic engines; they serve an irreplaceable role in public health. To identify and help meet the needs of their community, healthcare leaders need to prioritize effective communication and collaboration

with community leaders. The decision to make the needs of the community the top priority, even when so many other needs are competing for attention, has the power to form leaders into true community advocates and solidifies their personal values in a way that will shape the trajectory of their careers.

### Staff Support

It is crucial that those within the healthcare community support each other so they are in a better position to support their patients and communities. The pandemic has created new stresses and strains within the hospital work environment and has exacerbated issues, such as clinician burnout, that existed pre-2020. Today's employees also are facing immense pressures from outside their work environment.

Healthcare professionals' work is physically and mentally challenging. Leaders have a responsibility to ensure they provide their colleagues the necessary support to help them meet these challenges head-on while keeping their personal health and well-being intact. To address these challenges, organizations can offer training, places within the facility for employees to rest and restore during the workday, and support groups where staff members can talk openly about the issues they're facing. Other examples of solutions

include employee assistance programs and extensive executive rounding programs so leaders can better understand the challenges employees face and help in ways that are meaningful and effective.

**Patient Safety and Quality**

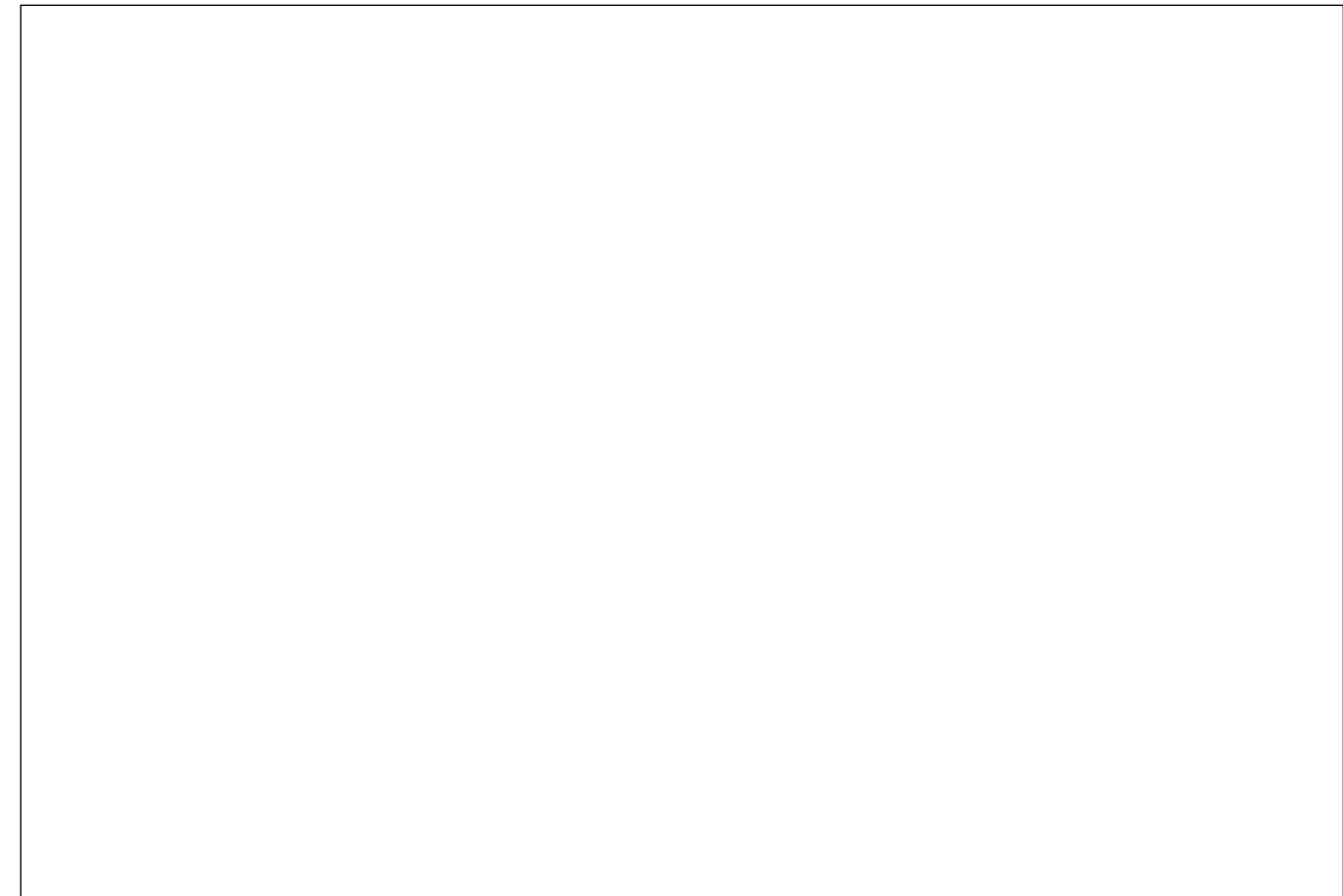
A lack of available staffing is an issue plaguing hospitals globally. An increase in temporary and travel staff, while helpful in responding to the staffing crisis, has made it more challenging to maintain a safe environment and a focus on quality outcomes for patients and staff. It seems the trend in temporary staff will continue to grow in the coming months, but healthcare organizations cannot allow quality or safety to degrade.

It is leaders' responsibility to clearly and consistently communicate the organization's quality and safety goals to all employees, but it takes an entire staff to create a culture of patient safety. This requires that employees feel confident in speaking up about potential safety issues. Leaders can encourage constant communication on these topics through daily safety huddles in each department, leadership rounding and clearly defined safety stop processes (staff-generated procedures that provide for an organized team response when an issue is identified that could potentially harm a patient or staff member). Like pulling a handle to stop the line at a factory, leaders need to make sure nothing "moves" until the safety issue is rectified.

**Financial Growth**

The upheaval of the past two years has had major financial implications. As organizations adjust to the current environment, it is crucial to resume focus on regular investment in the organization's long-term financial health. This is essential to hospitals' and health systems' ability to continuously improve themselves and deliver high-quality services to meet the evolving needs of patients.

Not every financial initiative has to result in a new bed tower—there are scalable ways to approach this. Examples include a new telehealth platform to reach new service areas or an expansion of mental health services. There are many ways to deliver care to the community, but keep in mind



which opportunities have the greatest potential to meet community need while promoting financial growth.

*The pandemic has required hospital CEOs to put certain priorities on the back burner so they could effectively respond to their communities' needs and ensure staff members' safety.*

**Operational Excellence**

It can be easy for leaders to become distracted by the crisis of the day, especially after two years of addressing the ever-changing circumstances of a once-in-a-century pandemic. It's essential, however, that organizations remind themselves daily about their overarching operational goals.

In primary care practices, that goal might be ensuring patients are seen regularly. In the ED, operational excellence could mean minimizing wait times. In hospitals, the focus may be on discharging patients efficiently into the appropriate level of care. Use of accurate and relevant metrics can help illuminate for leaders whether the staff's everyday work is adding up to the delivery of quality care that the organization seeks to provide. That is why it's so important for all staff to access trended data (via a dashboard, for instance) and compare it against a standard benchmark or goal, which leaders can review with their teams in daily huddles.

Part of growing as a leader is learning to discern which key areas must be made a top priority when every issue seems

urgent. The current transition into an endemic state is an ideal training ground for healthcare leaders as they address challenges that have not received close attention in over two years. Now is the time for leaders and organizations to refocus on supporting their communities and staff, patient safety and quality, financial growth, and operational

excellence to strengthen their organizations and communities. ▲

*Rand O'Leary, FACHE, is senior vice president, Northern Light Health, Brewer, Maine, and president, Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center, Bangor, Maine (roleary@northernlight.org).*

