

Skills and attributes of directors of educational programmes

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Objectives The purpose of this study was to obtain a list of desirable skills and attributes of prospective educational programme directors as judged by potential employers of future directors.

Design An international mail survey was conducted worldwide, using a one-page, open-ended questionnaire.

Setting University of Illinois at Chicago, USA.

Subjects Deans, department heads and chief executive officers from the various health professions.

Results A total of 139 respondents completed the questionnaire (22.3% response rate). Responses were remarkably similar across health professions. The nine leading skills were: oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, competent practitioner, educational goal-definition skills, educational design skills, prob-

lem-solving and decision-making skills, team worker and building skills, written communication skills and fiscal manager and budgeting skills. The three leading personal attributes were: visionary, flexible and open-minded and trustworthy and value-driven individual.

Conclusions The complete list of skills and attributes can be used by employers or administrators to build checklist items when hiring or reviewing programme directors or to plan and evaluate training programmes. The importance of leadership compared to managerial responsibilities is discussed as well as the need to train future educational programme directors.

Keywords *Clinical competence; education, medical, *standards; leadership; physician executives, *education; *programme evaluation.

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Introduction

Health care delivery is undergoing constant change that affects both patients and health professionals across the spectrum of care. Consequently each health profession is searching to redefine its role in a world where teamwork and patient satisfaction are paramount. Directors of educational programmes in the health professions are also engaged in new and challenging ventures. Nowicki¹ recently made several predictions about staff development: (1) old ways are no longer sufficient and viable and 'will take a back seat to more innovative, efficient, and effective ways of delivering quality health care and educating health professionals'; (2) greater emphasis will be put on maximizing the unique contributions of each member of the health care team and empowering health professionals with 'higher responsibility, accountability, and ownership'; (3) change will be a constant in the future, and the tradi-

tional roles of the director of educational programmes will become obsolete; (4) directors' roles will be redefined to include collaboration, networking and creativity as 'essential attributes of programme directors who will lead the way in the education of the health professionals of the 21st century'. What are the qualities of a 'good' programme director in health professions education today and for the decade to come? What skills and personal qualities are required?

The term 'programme director' is used here in a generic sense and includes, for example, course directors, curriculum directors and residency programme directors at the undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate levels of education. The duties and responsibilities of these programme directors are multiple and highly diversified. They include, to name a few, planning, budgeting, recruiting, reporting, organizing, assessing needs, resolving conflicts, innovating and monitoring change, searching for information, developing and training staff, abiding by and applying regulations, preparing accreditation papers and visits, not to mention teaching and supervising students. In addition to juggling the traditional managerial responsibilities that fall upon the programme director, a successful director must also possess leadership skills crucial for the

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evolving academic environment. Programme directors must balance their managerial responsibilities with their leadership capabilities in the changing environment of hospital amalgamation and high-stakes negotiations, where cost reduction and cost control often come in conflict with strongly held high standards of education. The programme director no longer deals with students and colleagues in well-defined in-hospital settings, but is more likely to deal with them along with patients, administrators, financial officers and other members of the health care team in outpatient settings in the mother institution or out in the community. 'Collaborative relationships with educators from various practice settings will [be needed] to bridge the gaps between academia, business, and community education'.¹ Success will evolve from 'a combination of educational and professional expertise and from personal characteristics'.²

Various frameworks have been proposed to describe the skills and qualities of programme directors in health professions education. In surveys of administrators of nursing schools in the United States, Short^{3,4} used a conceptual framework 'consisting of power, influence, interdependency, and mentor relationships interacting in the development of leadership',³ along with personal and career characteristics that contribute to the development process. The top six resources for goal achievement were communication skills, interpersonal skills, creativity in thinking, ability to mobilize groups, intelligence and academic credentials. May and Ferguson-Pare,⁵ in a position paper, proposed a set of knowledge and skills for upcoming leaders that includes broad knowledge of the profession, health care policy, management theory and practice, as well as skills in problem solving, negotiating, systems design and redesign, policy formulation and analysis, information systems utilization, human resource management and interdisciplinary team work. The shift from a focus on management to a focus on leadership is evident in May and Ferguson-Pare's conscious 'use of the word 'leader' for future conditions and 'manager' for current conditions.'⁵ Identifying the competencies needed for the work of the future is essential given the changing world of health care delivery and the challenging roles and responsibilities of programme directors in the education of future health professionals.

Methods

With this forward-looking perspective in mind, we conducted an international mail survey of potential employers of future programme directors, including deans and programme administrators in medicine,

nursing, allied health, pharmacy, dentistry, health education institutions (e.g. Association of Canadian Medical Colleges, American Hospital Association, American Nursing Association), hospital-based training programmes and managed-care organizations from 15 countries. The following, open-ended question was asked: 'Assume that you are considering hiring a programme director with major educational and leadership responsibilities at your institution. What educational and leadership skills and capabilities would you like to see in this person?' The instrument was pilot-tested locally and underwent two revisions before mailing the final version. We sampled extensively, knowing that deans and administrators are busy people. The survey was sent to 623 people (i.e. deans, department heads in universities, colleges and hospitals and chief executive officers), of whom 139 responded (22.3% return rate), mainly from the United States and Canada (86%). Although a modest response rate, this survey is unique because it reflects a wide representation of settings and professions worldwide (e.g. medicine (57%), nursing (18%), physio-occupational therapy (11%), pharmacy (7%) and other health professions (7%)). There was no geographic or professional selection bias; the percentage response in each group mirrored the mailing proportions (e.g. 86% US/Canada compared to 83% at mailing; 57%, 18% and 11% medicine-nursing-physio-occupational therapy compared to 61%, 16% and 13% at mailing). Since the main purpose of the survey was to flesh out skills and attributes, the wide geographic and professional representation obtained in the sample was judged acceptable and valuable.

Results

As surveys were returned, a master list of all responses was created. In order to manage the data, similar types of qualities were grouped together (e.g. research skills vs. negotiator or consensus builder). On average, respondents listed eight to nine skills or capabilities. Despite the wide variety of professions represented by the respondents, the survey results were remarkably similar across professions and positions. Similarly, responses from North America were comparable to those from the rest of the world; thus, responses will be considered as a whole. The nine leading skills listed by at least one-fifth of the respondents were (in descending order): oral communication skills (53%), interpersonal skills (40%), competent practitioner (31%), educational goal-definition skills (29%), educational design skills (29%), problem-solving and decision-making skills (29%), team worker and building skills (28%),

written communication skills (23%) and fiscal manager and budgeting skills (23%). The three leading personal attributes were visionary (34%), flexible and open-minded (27%) and trustworthy and value-driven individual (21%).

Programme directors 'wear many hats', each of which contribute uniquely to their programmatic responsibilities. Consequently, the skills and capabilities were tallied under five rubrics which view the programme director as (1) a health professional, (2) an educator, (3) a leader and manager, (4) a researcher and (5) personal attributes. The leading skills and attributes listed by the respondents in each rubric are presented in Table 1; original formulations were preserved as much as possible.

Discussion and conclusion

The skills and qualities identified by the broad range of health professionals in this study, namely medicine, nursing, physio-occupational therapy, pharmacy and allied health, echo in great part what others, such as Short^{3,4} or Powell and George,⁶ have found or proposed in more limited settings. The present results, with their definite emphasis on leadership and sense of vision, corroborate in an empirical way Nowicki¹ and Lehmann's⁷ exhortation of such qualities. Lehmann stated: 'Organizational leaders must have a sense of vision and mission, and change with an eye toward the future [...] to bridge the current and future state, taking the organization forward to grasp opportunities'.

The moderate frequencies associated with many leading skills and personal attributes, typically in the 20–40% range, also indicate that individual respondents tend to have a limited view of desired qualities. Consequently, an overall picture of the qualities of a 'good' programme director can only emerge from a composite of perceptions, as gathered in the present survey. Also, some skills, for example research design and grant-writing skills, although essential to certain programme directors, were mentioned by few respondents (9.4%). Thus, the overall list represents a unique mix of skills and capabilities that is more or less important depending on the specific educational programme being considered.

The list in Table 1 can be a useful tool in selecting attributes when hiring a new programme director or when evaluating a current director. The items in each rubric suggest a balance between skills and personal qualities, where shortcomings in one area (e.g. strategic planning and decision-making) cannot be wholly compensated by excellence in another (e.g. dedication and enthusiasm). Employers and administrators should

review the list of skills and attributes and determine those they deem most important for their particular setting and purpose. They can then use those items as a checklist when interviewing new candidates or reviewing existing personnel.

The need to train future programme directors with leadership qualities is imperative: 'Leadership development cannot be put off until tomorrow, and it must be more than mere window dressing'.⁸ For those interested in offering training programmes for programme directors, Bogdevic *et al.*⁹ identified three types of organizational and leadership development strategies: 'isolated faculty development workshops at national meetings, longitudinal faculty development fellowship programmes, and organizational change efforts within an academic department or training programme'. The skills and attributes listed in the present study are fundamental to these educational programmes. Such training programmes can provide an infrastructure that allows programme directors to develop and refine their skills and attributes. The organizers of such educational and leadership programmes (such as the Master of Health Profession Education Leadership Programme at the University of Illinois at Chicago) or continuing education programmes may find the list useful in defining educational goals and designing instructional activities. The list can also be used to evaluate existing programmes in order to confirm the appropriateness of their orientation and, if needed, to update the programme based on the skills and capabilities listed. Lehmann⁷ is clear about the necessity to select, educate and train managers for the future: 'If you leave this to chance, then you leave the organization's future to chance'. As predicted by Nowicki, 'educators will need their own network of support [...] to take the lead in developing a network of educators throughout their organization [that] can provide support to discuss practice concerns, share information, prevent reinventing the wheel, provide support for each other, and maintain one standard of educational practice'.¹ Graduate programmes, faculty development and continuing education can provide the environment for these skills and attitudes to be developed and fostered, and consequently provide career satisfaction, retention in academe and attainment of academic roles and higher academic rank.⁹

Programme directors at the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels of education in the health professions will be 'increasingly recognized as experts of the education process and facilitators of learning'¹ and will play key leadership roles in ways that go beyond simply managing educational resources and

Table 1 Main skills and attributes expected of educational programme directors as judged by an international panel of deans and administrators in the health professions*

<i>1. Programme director as a health professional</i>	
Skills	Knowledge
Competent practitioner (43)†	Wide knowledge and broad perspective of the health care system (15)
Experienced practitioner (16)	Familiar with modern technologies and practices (9)
Credentialed, certified practitioner (11)	
Active practitioner (4)	
<i>2. Programme director as an educator</i>	
Skills	Knowledge
Curriculum goals and learning objectives (40)†	Adult education (11)
Instruction and curriculum design (40)†	Accreditation (9)
Teaching skills (13)	Educational change and innovation (6)
Learning techniques and methods (11)	
Faculty development (9)	Achievements
Student assessment (6)	Experienced teacher (17)
Programme evaluation and needs assessment (6)	Local or national teaching awards-excellence (8)
Student-focused (5)	
<i>3. Programme director as a leader and manager</i>	
Communication	Management
Oral communicator (73)†	Problem solver, critical thinker, decision maker (40)†
Interpersonal skills (55)†	Organizer (37): able to streamline, prioritize
Team worker & builder (39)†	Manager (16)
Writing skills (32)†	Fiscal-budgeting (32)†
Networking (7)	Time management (13)
	Human resources management (9)
Vision	Supervisor, monitor (8)
Visionary (47)†	Delegator, empowers others (19)
Imaginative, creative, resourceful, insightful (21)	Strategic planner (18)
Change agent, innovator (18)	Computer literate, informatics (16)
	Conflict resolution (8)
Politics	Facilitator (8)
Negotiator (20)	Marketer (8)
Consensus builder (9)	Fund raiser (7)
	Personal
Knowledge	Flexible, open-minded (38)†
Institutional dynamics (10)	Experienced leader (27)
Health care system (8)	Follows through, doer (12)
Multidisciplinary perspective (8)	Task, goal-orientated (7)
	Realistic (9)
<i>4. Programme director as a researcher</i>	
Research-orientated (15)	
Scholarly publications and presentations (13)	
Research design and grant-writing skills (13)	
<i>5. General attributes of a programme director</i>	
In relation to others	Self
Trustworthy, honest, ethical, value-driven (29)†	Dedicated (16)
Respectful of others, of diversity (22)	Enthusiastic (12)
Listener (19)	Sense of humour (11)
Sensitive, empathic, compassionate, supportive (14)	Assertive, confident (11)
Role model (8)	Charismatic (10)
	Energetic (9)
	Willing to learn (8)
	Motivator (8)
	Optimist (6)

Table 1 (Contd.)*Personal accomplishments*

Community involvement, public health, social medicine (14)

Advanced degrees (12)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate number of respondents (of 139) listing the skill or personal characteristic.

†Indicates that the item is part of the overall top 12 skills and personal attributes.

applying rules and regulations. They are asked to lead the profession into new roles and to innovate and motivate their students and colleagues in evolving paradigms of health care delivery.¹ In today's world of market-driven forces, programme directors cannot afford to simply react or attend to the urgent; they are challenged to lead and to ready the profession for what lies on the horizon.

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