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Brian W. Hughes (bwhughes@carilionclinic.org, [linkedin.com/in/brian-w-hughes/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/brian-w-hughes/)) is a Compliance Operations Manager for Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, VA.

Redefining talent and growing compliance teams from within

by Brian W. Hughes, MPA, CHC

We often learn the most important lessons from negative experiences. I once heard a compliance leader state just how hard it was to find talented team members in the geographic area where their healthcare system was located. On its face, this was not a controversial statement since compliance, as a profession, faces the same challenge as other fields during a time of shifting labor and demographic conditions—hiring and retaining good staff.

The main problem with that statement was that the leader voiced it in front of four team members, all of whom immediately looked down toward the ground. By easy association with the leader's statement, the team must not be talented.

That very comment—and the leadership belief and established culture leading to it—set the tone for failure.

This article asserts that meeting the challenges associated with hiring and retaining good compliance staff requires a fundamental change in the predominant thinking of many leaders. To build the best teams, compliance leaders must reimagine how they recognize and foster talent. We will identify this challenge, assign responsibility, discuss both talent development and its impact, and redefine it before focusing on specific ways compliance leaders can set a tone and create structure that builds talent intrinsically through high engagement from staff and teams.

Staffing challenges in compliance

In some areas of the country, it is not uncommon for open compliance positions to remain unfilled for many months due to a lack of qualified applicants. Healthcare compliance competes with other industry compliance arenas for good candidates, as well as other career fields more generally.

Accepting this challenge as a reality of our current economic and labor conditions means that leaders may be unlikely to find—in a reasonable amount of time—what many would traditionally identify as an ideal candidate perfectly suited to quickly take on a specific compliance role with the education, training, experience, and subject matter acumen the role requires. Lack of staffing requires fraud, waste, and abuse—and many other risks—to go unmitigated due to lack of attention or a reduction in compliance program scale, which is challenging in growing healthcare systems for which the number of risks identified through regular assessments only increases.

A conventionally ideal candidate is what the compliance leader—previously mentioned in this article—referred to in describing talented staff and a perspective this offering seeks to challenge.

Accountable leadership

The difficulty in finding talented compliance staff begs the question: “Whose fault is it if, as a compliance leader, you do not have a talented team?”

You—as the leader.

Accountable leaders do not have the luxury of assigning internal or external circumstances to the failure to develop a good compliance team that achieves its mission of preventing, identifying, and mitigating risk. Leaders are simply accountable for this task, and it is up to them to achieve it despite any challenges. Boards and committees have the federal expectation to ensure the compliance function is adequately resourced; your efforts can support or hinder this.^[1] While many compliance leaders consider themselves experts from a technical perspective on the topic of fraudulent billing, for example, those who have staff should find that leadership of people is a primary responsibility, as their teams are more capable of accomplishing more in the way of risk reduction than they ever could, on balance.

The primary manner by which a compliance leader accomplishes their mission is through their team, which is, hopefully, high-performing. High-performing team members want to be there, tackling difficult challenges for more than a paycheck or window office, with effort and without you watching over their shoulders. This effort, engagement, and dedication is, ultimately, voluntary.

Thus, the leader is responsible for creating the conditions where mission accomplishment occurs through the efforts of individual employees and collective teams. This primarily involves creating talent despite any challenges. In large part, leaders can generate and cultivate this talent by properly focusing on hiring, motivating, and developing staff with the right qualities.

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