

A Vacancy as Opportunity: Interim Management or Permanent Placement as a Catalyst for Program Change

By Jason Bisesi

Amid increasing healthcare competition and continued uncertainty about the financial and regulatory future, hospital leaders should be focused on ways to ensure viability in both the short and long term. And, what poses the largest risk to the continued growth of a specialty program? A few varying scenarios come to mind, but industry-wide, the most common issue that brings a near-certain negative impact is stagnation among leaders in key clinical specialties. In fact, this can be an often-overlooked *opportunity* for programs to work past an existing lack of momentum and reshape their future strategy.

“A First-Hand Perspective” (below) refers to a cath lab operational assessment Corazon performed. You can see the importance that effective staffing has on continued operational success. However, considering only direct midlevel staffing needs can be a pitfall of many programs. For any unit or division as a whole, to drive not only exceptional patient care but also programmatic success, the value of experienced, high quality leadership cannot be overlooked — specifically in this case, the cath lab director and cardiovascular service line administrator. We believe this model of “starting at the top” is of the utmost importance for all service lines, divisions, and departments.

A regular critical look at each key service line area, including a review of cardiovascular, neurosciences, and orthopedics can accomplish several goals. Most particularly, this effort can provide yearly assurance that the service line is operating at peak efficiency, or conversely, provide an opportunity to move on from missed opportunities such as out-of-date processes, failing to hit benchmarks crucial to organizational success, and/or sub-par leadership qualities.

Often programs fall into a false sense of comfort, and allow poor habits and inefficient routine to continue for the sake of simplicity; but, when this happens, patients can suffer and dollars are usually lost. An annual analysis presents the opportunity to identify gaps in personnel that may be restricting the program’s maximum levels of competence. By embracing change and identifying key opportunities for growth, facilities can turn a potentially intimidating situation into an opportunity to acquire talented individuals with a wealth of experience and knowledge that can launch a program to the forefront. Furthermore, new talent can bring different experience from working in a different setting or market, and provide insight on how others are comparing nationwide.

The most frequent issue Corazon encounters at client sites in regards to in-house staffing needs is twofold: both the quantity and quality of candidates they receive are wanting. By utilizing a national search firm, one with a wealth of contacts and an expansive network of relationships, an organization can gain not only a valued asset in identifying individuals for the aforementioned key roles, but also gain access to the same large reach and network of contacts of the search firm.

Traditionally, whether a facility is part of a large health system or a standalone entity, in-house recruiting is done through posting the positions on the hospital’s website, as well as through internal promotion. While in some instances this can be effective, there is no guarantee (Figure 1) that the best candidates will be reached if the scope of a search is limited.



Figure 1. The typical search length for high-level leadership positions in the cardiovascular service line, highlighting an opportunity to bring in experienced leaders to position the program for renewed programmatic success.

In our experience, an effective yet under-utilized route is that of the interim- to-permanent candidate. This approach provides an experienced professional who can “steady the ship” and “bridge the gap” while a search is conducted for the permanent replacement. An interim leader can no doubt provide insight into what makes an ideal candidate for the position, or sometimes even transition into that permanent solution.

A Brief Case Study

The below achievements were realized in 90 days with a Corazon-placed interim cardiac program manager during a cath lab expansion:

- Saved over \$300,000 for the organization in product costs for the first 200 interventional and cath lab cases.

- Saved 20% of the budgeted capital items.
- Discovered \$26,000 in missing charges by reviewing just two percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) cases.
- Adjusted the current chagemaster to align with local standards, increasing gross revenue by more than 40%
- Increased revenues from \$45 million to \$112 million while decreasing department revenue-to-expense ratio from 27.2% to 14.1%

Another benefit of an interim placement is that the temporary hire essentially serves as a 90-day working interview for both client and assignee. Both the organization and the candidate have the opportunity to “test-drive” the role before making a decision. This model has the tendency to eliminate the flight risk on the part of the candidate and increase the retention of a very important position.

An ideal interim-to-permanent placement is not always a reality, whatever the reason. But, this should not preclude an organization from utilizing interim managers while recruiting for the permanent hire. Corazon firmly believes that a cardiovascular program leadership vacancy is an opportunity to bring an experienced leader — and along with him or her, new experience, expertise, and perspectives — to the program to participate in the interview process. Such insight can be invaluable for assisting in such an important hiring process and decision.

Furthermore, interim assignees are often viewed as change agents, able to begin enacting a plan to remedy some of the deficiencies identified inside the service line. An interim can strategically implement new ideas, processes, or policies that will push the program to new heights, all as an impartial outsider. As a permanent hire is made, the interim assignee can provide operational overlap to onboard the new hire and leave the organization in the best possible scenario before ending the interim assignment.

When beginning a search for a permanent hire, we recommend starting with some tough questions:

- What are the goals of the organization?
- What is the ideal type of candidate for the position?
- What goals will he or she be tasked with accomplishing?
- How can we ensure, in a collaborative fashion, that the selected candidate will be successful in achieving said goals?

While many facilities are looking for strategic insight, or a candidate who can accomplish service line growth and implement general improvement in multiple areas, others may have a different type of candidate skillset in mind. But regardless of the candidate qualifications (which all stakeholders should agree on!), the alignment of program goals and those of the organization as a whole must be communicated to the candidates. Finding the right

individual to achieve these goals is key, so the candidates should be clear as to the main responsibilities of the position.

Through leveraging national experience, Corazon finds it imperative to establish a comprehensive job description, position/program goals, and job model at the outset of the search. This allows for casting a much larger net than would be otherwise possible, but also helps to build a qualified candidate pool. Through this effort, the organization will be able to see firsthand what they have been missing: by identifying candidates that would not only succeed in the vacant role, but excel, the organization is given the opportunity to reassess goals, objectives, and departmental strategies moving forward, shaping new goals around the qualities of the potential new leader(s).

Essentially, finding an exceptional candidate that exceeds an organization’s expectations will no doubt raise the bar not only for the immediate program vacancy being filled, but for the organization as a whole.

Whether a small stand-alone hospital, a large national health system, or an organization that falls somewhere in the middle, it is important to remember that what is often perceived as a difficult predicament is really an opportunity to apply a short-term investment to yield high-value returns. While an unexpected position vacancy can be perceived as an overwhelming hurdle, it can also be considered as an excellent opportunity to ensure the continued growth and development of your cardiovascular program.



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