

Answering the Call: *Veterans as Civilian Healthcare Leaders*

A Witt/Kieffer Survey Report

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Military service is a breeding ground for exceptional leaders. Despite this fact, former military medical leaders are often undervalued and overlooked in recruitments for civilian healthcare executives. To find out why, and to explore what can be done about it, Witt/Kieffer initiated a focused survey of military veterans currently in healthcare industry leadership positions. The feedback we received is both impassioned and insightful.

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Leaders Connecting Leaders

From Service to Civilian



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agree "the transition from a military to civilian role in healthcare was challenging"

Introduction

Military veterans bring top-notch management skills, honed to exacting standards, and yet they are often undervalued and overlooked in executive searches. For this reason Witt/Kieffer initiated a survey of military veterans currently in healthcare leadership positions to get their insights on this issue and what can be done to facilitate the transitions of military medical leaders into civilian healthcare positions.

Witt/Kieffer surveyed 24 veterans (23 men, 1 woman) currently in civilian healthcare leadership for this survey. Two-thirds had been in the Army, a bit less than one-third in the Navy, and others in the Air Force or Coast Guard. Survey participants' highest past military roles ranged from Captain to Brigadier General.

The pool of respondents represented a broad mix of roles. Six had been military physicians, five had been military officers and four held both roles; four had been in the military service corps; others had been combat arms and infantry officers, in the engineer corps or in operations (finance).

What perhaps stands out most about the feedback we received is the thoughtfulness of the comments. These executives are clearly passionate about this issue, greatly value the time they served in military leadership, and wish to help pave the way for other veterans to assume key healthcare industry positions.

Preparedness and Perceptions

The veterans' responses suggest that these individuals clearly feel that the military has prepared them well for positions within the broader healthcare industry. They suggest that there is misunderstanding and even bias among healthcare organizations regarding what ex-military officers bring to the leadership table. There is also a recognition that military medical officers and military physicians face a daunting transition into their post-military careers and must better prepare themselves for their work lives after leaving the service. *The results on the next page illustrate these thoughts.*

Making the Transition

What was the most challenging part of the move from military to healthcare executive ranks? Some respondents cited the inherent differences between military and civilian worlds. Others had to overcome a lack of appreciation for military system values.

Among the veterans' introspective observations:

"After being an expert in the military system, I had trouble understanding how decisions were made in civilian programs where the emphasis was on productivity rather than leadership training."

"The loss of a professional network and need to build a new one."

"Not knowing what you don't know in commercial healthcare - particularly finance and budget execution, reimbursement and margins."

Among the external challenges faced:

"So many people have no concept what an incredible learning experience military service is."

"There is little understanding or interest in relevance of military roles to civilian roles."

"The misconception that military leadership skills are centered on 'giving orders' and staff is obligated to follow simply because of a supervisor's title or position."

Preparedness and Perceptions: Results

After my service, I was prepared to enter a civilian leadership role immediately.



I received sufficient support in transitioning from the military into the healthcare industry.



The transition from a military to civilian role in healthcare was challenging.



The skills I learned in the military have served me well in my civilian healthcare career.



It was difficult to translate my military skills into the current healthcare environment.



My organization sees military veterans as valuable employees.



My organization prioritizes having veterans among its leadership ranks.



Battling Biases

Did veterans, as job candidates in civilian healthcare, encounter biases or concerns about their military backgrounds? Some survey responses were nuanced while others pointed to a baseless lack of consideration for military skills and training.

"Yes, because 'you did not grow up in their system.'"

"They questioned my ability to think strategically, not tactically."

"There is a misconception that military leaders solely use position as leverage to execute and get results."

"There is a perception that military medicine is 'tier 2' medicine."

"There were some stereotypes that were quickly dispelled once people got to know me."

"I did not receive any consideration for the leadership skills/training I received in the military. It was like starting at 'square 1.'"

Military Skills in Civilian Healthcare

When considering what drives veterans, two words come forward: leadership and mission. The survey results make it clear that the respondents are locked in on those areas.

The veterans seemed well-poised to provide the skills that can drive civilian healthcare organizations toward their business objectives:

“Leadership, mission-based focus, work ethic, loyalty, critical thinking, global perspective, collaboration, negotiations, critical incident management, resource management.”

“The fact that we can learn new things quickly and are accustomed to solving complex problems in a collaborative environment.”

“Consensus building, team building, provider engagement, employee relations, performance management, strategic planning, written and oral communication, critical decision making, execution-mindset, and ability to deal with stressful situations.”

“Resilience, balanced with adaptability.”

One respondent listed three points to emphasize the value of his military experience:

- *“The Navy put me in charge of far more than I would have been in a civilian position. It also emphasized breadth and understanding of many aspects of medicine and leadership.”*
- *“In the military’s strict hierarchy, you learn how to disagree professionally and with respect.”*
- *“You cannot just ‘quit’ the military. You have to learn how to make things work.”*

Sharing Career Advice

Survey respondents drew from deep personal experience to share their wisdom with military careerists looking toward civilian healthcare leadership roles. Two-thirds had fulfilled more than 20 years of active duty; 70 percent noted that between five and 20 years had passed since their service.

Recurring themes for a successful transition were preparation, an understanding of business practices, and professional networking. Specifically:

“Plan two to three years in advance, and begin the transition while still in service.”

“Acquire an advanced degree (MBA, MHA, MMM, MPH) mid-career or earlier.”

“Develop communication skills for organizations where influence trumps authority.”

“Prepare to deal with bias: Not everyone has a positive view of the military.”

“Expect a transitional role in first job after military service.”

And finally, these words of inspiration:

“Be humble and willing to roll up your sleeves and work hard to make up for any experience gaps, yet with full confidence that you bring a lot of unique and highly valuable skills and experience to the table.”

Conclusion

The transition from military to civilian leadership roles can present special challenges, but they are worth addressing. Healthcare organizations can:

- Embrace diversity in leadership styles and approaches
- Anticipate potential institutional stereotypes regarding military veterans
- Appreciate professional skills that are honed in military service
- Provide career development support to veterans
- Expand initiatives for hiring veterans to include executives

For their part, veterans can:

- Seek out education and leadership training outside of the military when possible
- Network and interact with civilian healthcare professionals and executives throughout their military service
- Take advantage of career support offered to veterans when anticipating and making the transition between the military and civilian careers
- Learn how to translate skills and competencies gained in the military into language that will resonate with healthcare employers and future colleagues
- Consider transitional positions that allow them to get their feet wet in a civilian work environment and can be stepping stones to desired leadership roles
- Seek counsel and mentoring from executives who have made similar transitions – there are many leaders willing to help

Military medical officers are not always given full consideration for leadership roles in civilian healthcare organizations, nor do they always fully prepare themselves for the obstacles of this transition, as the veterans participating in this report indicate. However, these are challenges worth addressing, as former military leaders present unique qualifications and can make clear and definite contributions to today's civilian healthcare industry.



“I was highly valued

organizationally. Any bias was from coworkers with their own assumed stereotypes.”

“After active duty I was immediately able to transfer the skills learned in project management to the civilian workforce with significant advantage over others who had only limited actual experience.”

“The rapid turnover in the military in jobs and locations forces creative adaptability and provides new approaches and ideas.”

“Veterans understand duty, honor and service.”

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