

Abstract

Physician professional identity remains elusive despite the role of physician leaders becoming more critical in a complex environment of healthcare. An abundance of literature exists relative to professional identity in other medical disciplines, such as nursing, though a gap remains with regards to physician leaders. The purpose of this study was to determine how professional identity of practicing physicians in leadership roles is established. This qualitative phenomenological study utilized authentic leadership theory as the lens through which to view data and results. Participants included eleven physician leaders from varied specialties and administrative time allocations. Data collection included recorded semi-structured interviews, conducted in person. Transcribed narratives were analyzed utilizing guidance from Moustakas and Saldanas, resulting in the emergence of five primary themes: identity formation begins prior to medical school, early leadership experiences form the basis for future roles, desire for greater impact drives physicians into leadership roles, physician leaders experience a duality of roles, and physician leaders are, above all, physicians first. Recommendations include future research of the perspectives of physician leader colleagues, selecting participants with full-time administrative responsibilities, expanding the geographic regions of potential participants, and developing physician-specific leadership courses. The expansive influence and clinical expertise unique to physician leaders can lead to exceptional outcomes for both organizations and patients. Intentional steps should be taken to ensure physicians hold both capability and competency for leadership roles.