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# The Empty Chair: Jeff Bezos Principles that Can Shape Healthcare in the Post-Covid World

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*“What we need to do is always lean into the future; when the world changes around you and when it changes against you - what used to be a tail wind is now a head wind - you have to lean into that and figure out what to do because complaining isn't a strategy.”<sup>ii</sup> – Jeff Bezos, Former CEO, Amazon.com*

Jeff Bezos, who transitioned this week from his long-standing role as CEO of Amazon, led Amazon throughout its rapid transformation from online bookstore to a global leader in e-commerce, cloud computing, digital steaming, and artificial intelligence. Well known for his obsession with the customer, Mr. Bezos had many unique principles that defined Amazon and perhaps none was more important than The Empty Chair. The Empty Chair is a straightforward concept – it simply requires that in conference rooms throughout Amazon’s network, an empty chair be reserved for the customer. To ensure they have a seat at the table. The chair reinforces and serves as a constant reminder across the organization that customer impact must be at the forefront of every decision.

As healthcare executives continue to recover from the Coronavirus pandemic – the continuing battle to preserve communities, acceleration in the transition to digital delivery of care, and significant losses in both staffing and revenue – it is clear that the coming years will be fraught with challenges. However, there is also an opportunity to rewrite the landscape. By adopting concepts such as the Empty Chair and other Amazonian principles, healthcare executives can model Mr. Bezos and best position their organizations to not only compete, but to win in a Post-Covid world.

The following four principles have been key to Amazon’s success and will be analyzed on how they can be applied by healthcare executives.

## **#1: Obsess Over Customers**

The first Amazon Leadership Principle is *Customer Obsession* and it states “Leaders start with the customer and work backwards. They work vigorously to earn and keep customer trust. Although leaders pay attention to competitors, they obsess over customers.”<sup>ii</sup> This principle is not just a platitude, but it is inculcated throughout and drives all aspects of the organization.

Focusing on the customer, as opposed to a product, technology, or competitors, has built trust, brand value, and leadership in the market. While other principles are important, this one is Amazon’s foundation.

Mr. Bezos, summed up this approach when he stated, “Even when they don’t yet know it, customers want something better, and your desire to delight customers will drive you to invent on their behalf.”

## **Takeaway for Health Care Executives:**

1. Obsess over patients – their outcomes, their experience, and their needs.
2. Understand patients’ needs and desires both today and into the future.

3. Drive your teams to deliver. Anything less will result in loss of trust and confidence with your patients.

## **#2: Master a Simple Business Model – Broad Selection, Low Price, and Convenience**

The Amazon business model is straightforward: customers want choice, low prices, and convenience. And since customer obsession underpins this model, they do everything they can to deliver each.

When it comes to selection, Amazon uses its platform to sell its own products as well as products from third party vendors and competitors. They strive for low prices, and because they are a global leader in operational efficiencies, they can keep prices low. Equally as important, Amazon offers one of the most user friendly and convenient ordering interfaces. They understand that their interaction with the customer begins the moment the customer desires a product - whether at home, in the car, or watching a child's soccer game – a customer can think of an item, order it within seconds, and have it on their doorstep within hours.

### **Takeaway for Health Care Executives:**

- 1) Patients want options. Offer a range of services and treatments and ensure partnerships cover complimentary services not offered in house.
- 2) Patients want low costs, accurate cost estimates, and price transparency. Develop systems that offer all three.
- 3) Patient care must begin the moment it is needed. Virtual care, speed, and convenience are essential to success. Make it easy for patients to register, find the right provider, move through the system, and find the most effective care.

## **#3: Use Technology to Understand the Customer, Enhance the Customer Experience, & Eliminate Waste**

The purpose of data is to enable users of the data to make better decisions, increase efficiencies and ultimately improve performance. There are few organizations that do it better than Amazon. Amazon has figured out how to leverage vast amounts of data to provide enormous insights on customer preferences. They can predict customer purchases which in turn drives inventory management, accelerating customer delivery times. Their logistics network is structured so that all relevant data is readily available across the full supply and delivery chain. The entire information network is set up so that data is constantly being analyzed to eliminate any unnecessary waste.

Amazon has also perfected an interface that can be used by any type of customer. Whether a customer wants to make an impulse purchase, do a quick comparison of choices, or conduct extensive research of various options, the interface allows it. They make reviews readily available, prices easy to see, and both online and voice customer service engagements are pleasant and customer focused. Regardless of the customer, Amazon uses technology to empower the customer, creating an experience that is quick, easy, and often enjoyable.

### **Takeaway for Health Care Executives:**

- 1) Take stock in current technologies and information systems and ask:
  - a. Are they compatible and do they support each other?
  - b. Do they assist the organization in making better business and care decisions?
  - c. Do they assist the organization and the patients in understanding their costs?
  - d. Do they improve outcomes?

- 2) Healthcare is transitioning to a consumer mindset. In doing so, technologies and patient experience must be similar to the online and mobile experiences currently experienced in other industries.
- 3) Price transparency is a major source of frustration for patients and in worst case, can cause them unnecessary financial hardships. Healthcare leaders must explore ways to improve price transparency within its customer base.

#### **#4: Strong Leadership Matters**

Even in a technologically driven organization, there is still a need for strong and effective leaders. While technology is a large part of the equation for Amazon's success, their true difference maker is leadership. Like most organizations, Amazon's leadership starts at the top. Jeff Bezos developed a set of 14 core leadership principles<sup>iii</sup> that have been the foundation for a results oriented, entrepreneurial, and competitive culture. This culture is clearly understood and meticulously adhered to by every employee throughout its vast global network. While Amazon leaders are required to have both technical and functional expertise, they must also be people leaders as burnout and retention are always a concern. Hiring and developing strong leaders is a core principle at Amazon and a major part of its long-term success.

#### **Takeaway for Health Care Executives:**

- 1) Have a clear and unmistakable organizational culture. Ensure that it infuses every level of your organization.
- 2) Use analytics and technology where it makes sense within the organization. But remember, healthcare is centered around human interaction. Let the data drive efficiencies in areas that are not human centric to enable the time and space for exceptional human engagement where needed.
- 3) Hire servant leaders who lead with empathy, compassion, and trust. Healthcare is a business of improving the human condition. This requires an understanding of technology and data analytics but most importantly it requires leaders with extremely high emotional intelligence.<sup>iv</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

Over the past 20 years, Jeff Bezos has innovated, adapted, and led Amazon to become one of the most influential and successful companies in the world. Healthcare organizations must do the same. Those who do not, will simply not survive in a post-Covid world. However, by applying the above, outlined principles, healthcare organizations can position themselves to not only survive but to thrive well into the future.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/jeff-bezos-amazons-earth-ceo-reaches-stars/story?id=20363682#:~:text=into%20the%20future.%22,%22What%20we%20need%20to%20do%20is%20always%20lean%20into%20the,isn't%20a%20strategy.%22>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.amazon.jobs/en/principles>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> <https://hbr.org/2017/02/the-rise-of-ai-makes-emotional-intelligence-more-important>