



## Health Care Strategy Insights: The Evolving Role of the CSO

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The role of the CSO is often ambiguous, requiring flexibility and adaptability as organizational needs shift and evolve. The COVID-19 pandemic proved this point, as CSOs had to rapidly adapt to meet the needs of their organizations which were facing unprecedented challenges.

In recognition of the various roles that CSOs play over their tenure the [“Six Faces of the CSO”](#) framework was developed to better understand and articulate the most common roles CSOs take on. Through over 250 surveys of senior strategy executives, 6 key roles, or “faces,” that CSOs adopt were identified:

1. The Adviser- helping to shape the long-range strategy
2. The Sentinel- sensing and interpreting market shifts
3. The Banker- driving deals and partnerships
4. The Engineer- designing and running the strategic planning process
5. The Aid-de-Camp- performing as the CEO's unofficial Chief of Staff
6. The Special Projects Leader- tracking high-impact initiatives

Health care CSOs adopted variations of these six “faces” throughout the pandemic, and their roles continue to evolve as their organizations are emerging into the post-pandemic era and are facing new challenges and broad societal needs.

### The Focus of the Health Care CSO Role Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

While CSOs are traditionally tasked with guiding their organization’s long-term strategic priorities, during the COVID-19 pandemic health care CSOs had to dramatically shift their focus to prioritize short term goals. Many adapted into “**The Special Projects Leader**” role to help their organization navigate and accomplish [critical short-term priorities](#). For example, CSOs monitored the latest updates from government agencies in order to develop strategies for vaccine distribution. Many became more involved in overcoming the day-to-day roadblocks of the pandemic and had to de-prioritize longer strategic planning during the pandemic.

The social justice movement that accelerated in 2020 following a wave of tragic race-related incidents was also a defining event for health care organizations and their CSOs. Historically, CSOs were less involved with their organization’s **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I)** priorities to avoid overlapping roles with the Chief Diversity Officer. Over the past year, we have observed a significant change in this arrangement, as many organizations have declared DE&I to be an enterprise-wide priority and have started to drive DE&I efforts across all of their functions and business units. As a result, we have observed CSOs getting significantly more involved in the articulation, communication and execution of DE&I goals across their organizations. We have also observed CSOs leveraging their role as “**Sentinels**” to guide this shift and determine long-term strategies that are focused around organizational purpose and health care equity.

### Key Lessons Learned about the Role of the Health Care CSO

The tumultuous events of the past year have re-emphasized the importance of the CSO. CSOs are able to help steer their organizations through challenges and craft strategies that enable organizational agility. Specifically, CSOs have noted a number of key learnings from this past year:

- **Surrender the role of the SME:** Due to their position and expertise in navigating their organizations, CSOs are finding that they are often most successful when coaching and steering other leaders to drive major initiatives forward rather than being the sole driver/owner.
- **Promote innovation by providing strategic direction to a bottoms-up approach:** Key innovative ideas are often generated by teams on the ground who possess specialized knowledge. However, grassroots level innovation without guidance can frequently wreak

havoc on organizations, as efforts are unconnected to an organization's strategic direction or (worse yet) duplicative of each other. We have seen CSOs take a significantly more active role in supporting and guiding grassroots level innovation in their organizations. By providing strategic direction while promoting an innovation-driven culture across the organization, CSOs can gather and filter expert-generated ideas to accelerate those into initiatives for future organizational growth.

- **Assess market shifts and accelerate knowledge:** Core to the "Sentinel" role, CSOs should intentionally stay apprised of and synthesize market shifts, external innovation, and current events and disseminate the "so what" to their team and broader organization. CSOs can accelerate knowledge flow and awareness on external matters which are significant to their organizations and use this information to build a case for innovation.

## Conclusion

As the health care landscape continues to shift with changes in legislation, care models, price transparency, and virtual health, CSOs may need to engage in roles outside of the "six faces." Through keen awareness and reaction to internal and external events that impact the organization's long-term trajectory, and by remaining nimble, CSOs can set their organizations up for continued growth and market success.

*Please reach out to Tom or Sarah with any additional questions.*



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