

## Ashley Vertuno, 2024 Recipient of the Robert S. Hudgens Memorial Award for Young Healthcare Executive of the Year



When Ashley Vertuno was named to *Palm Springs Life's* 40 under 40 list at the age of 26, it was evident that she was on a path to making significant contributions. A decade later, she has been honored as the 2024 recipient of the American College of Healthcare Executives Robert S. Hudgens Memorial Award for Young Healthcare Executive of the Year.

Vertuno stepped into the role of CEO at HCA Florida JFK North Hospital in West Palm Beach, Florida, in the midst of the pandemic in 2020. Although healthcare facilities nationwide continue to struggle with staff recruitment and retention issues, she has assembled a visionary leadership team focused on workforce stabilization through organizational growth. Under her leadership, the hospital has transformed from a singular service line facility to a comprehensive acute care provider, addressing the diverse needs of the growing community. The hospital's expansion now includes interventional services, surgical oncology, robotic services, spine care, women's services, and enhancements to existing emergency room, gastroenterology, urology, and behavioral health services.

In an interview with the *Journal of Healthcare Management (JHM)*, Vertuno spoke about team building, taking risks, setting high standards, and innovative thinking—all while keeping her team and patients at the center of every decision. The interview is edited for clarity and format.

**JHM:** *To what do you attribute your fast rise to the top of healthcare administration?*

**Vertuno:** Coaching has been a fundamental part of my life, beginning with my experience in soccer. Playing as a striker from age five through high school, and then being as assistant coach to U-14 boys/girls travel, I learned the importance of self-reflection, constructive criticism, and feedback—skills that have been pivotal in my professional growth as well as in shaping others' skills.

A significant turning point came when a new coach recognized potential in me that I hadn't seen. He suggested I switch to being an outside midfielder, a completely new position for me. This taught me a valuable lesson: sometimes others can see strengths in us that we can't see in ourselves. This lesson—embracing discomfort to grow—continues to resonate in my current role.

© 2024 Foundation of the American College of Healthcare Executives  
DOI: 10.1097/JHM-D-24-00115

As part of the Southern California Healthcare Executive Network annual summit in 2015, I went to a session with a CEO and an executive coach talking about how coaching can help develop you as a leader. Their insights deeply resonated with me, reinforcing my belief in the power of coaching and feedback.

Early in my career, I was fortunate to have supervisors who provided mentoring, executive coaching, and exposure to diverse leadership styles. This early support was instrumental in shaping my leadership style and contributed significantly to my professional growth. Today, mentoring and sponsoring others is at the core of my leadership values. I attribute much of my continued success to these practices.

**JHM:** *What is the secret to creating high-performing teams? How did you put together your executive team?*

**Vertuno:** When you are building a team, you have to understand what cycle the organization is currently in: starting up, rebuilding, becoming sustainable, or going from good to great. Depending on the cycle the organization is in, you may be looking for different things. With a brand-new team, you're setting a certain tone and culture, which could last for years even if you move on from that organization. I've kept this in mind as I put together my own executive team. Whatever your decisions may be, the goal should always be to guide an organization toward excellence.

As leaders, we are called to manage and grow other leaders. Early in my career, other leaders invested in my growth. Now a CEO myself, I have found it extremely rewarding to do the same for my colleagues. I support their career aspirations, supply them with resources, mentor them, and provide growth opportunities for them. If you give others the tools they need to be successful, they're going to move the organization in the right direction.

This mindset has given me the freedom to adopt a more holistic approach in evaluating who might be the right person for the right job. Some members of my team were new to their roles at the outset, but they had certain qualities that I knew would make them a perfect fit for our team. Our skill sets complement one another, allowing us to learn from one another and do what's right for patient care. We have an appreciation for different perspectives, and we allow those perspectives to shape our approach to the tasks at hand.

I also consider each person's potential for reaching new heights. Every person on my team has shown that they are willing to roll up their sleeves and do the job that needs to be done. They exhibit a tenacity to grow and learn. That energy can be just as valuable as their professional experience or their prior job title. It is always a priority for me to cultivate these qualities among the people I lead.

**JHM:** *How do you build a motivated and engaged workforce?*

**Vertuno:** I ask people this question all the time: What do you want to be when you grow up? If you can figure out what motivates people to come to work and what they aspire to achieve, it allows you to understand their *why*—why they're in healthcare, why

they want to pursue this path, and what their ultimate career goals are. Then we can thoughtfully place them in roles that not only support our organization but also align with their personal ambitions.

In our new-hire orientation, I ask new hires to discuss their career aspirations with their supervisors within the first 30 days. And then, at the 60- to 90-day breakfast that we have, we follow up to see how those conversations went. This practice fosters an environment of professional and personal development and creates a culture where management is invested in helping you improve and succeed. Let's not forget, as Quint Studer says, "Happy employees equal happy patients."

We've got retention issues and workforce challenges in healthcare, and a sense of safety is a key component. With 75% of our executive suite being female, we benefit from a very empathetic culture, but we are no-nonsense too. We're friendly and mission-driven, and we hold people accountable to ensure a safe environment for everyone. Every single person in my executive suite has an open-door policy. That means that when you see us in the hall, we're going to stop and take the time to have a conversation with you. This creates a safe, supportive environment from the frontline staff all the way up to the top.

**JHM:** *What can we learn from the next generation of healthcare professionals?*

**Vertuno:** You have a generation coming in and saying, *Let's think about this differently*. I think it's a challenge we should embrace wholeheartedly.

I remember when I was in my 20s and going up the ranks, people would say, *You're a millennial, but you're different. You roll up your sleeves, you don't mind working beyond the 9 to 5*. That stereotype of millennials no longer holds, and now we're focusing on Gen Z, the evolving nursing workforce, and how we adapt to these changes.

Most employees want a job where they can do their work and come back the next day, but they don't want that on-call period. Someone recently asked me, "Have you thought about what it looks like not to have an on-call period?" It got me thinking about maintaining quality care and evidence-based practices while innovating our approach. This kind of feedback is invaluable, and I'm eager to explore it further with my team.

Embracing change is crucial. If we can articulate the *why* and the *how*, it transforms the game. For example, artificial intelligence is revolutionizing patient care. We're using it to reduce hospital stays and enhance workflow for our nursing staff and physicians. It's really cool to see how technology can be leveraged to improve our processes.

At the end of the day, our core mission remains—taking care of patients. There's a patient behind everything we do. Those bedside handoffs from nurse to nurse are critical, ensuring continuity and quality of care.

We're also focused on creating positions that allow for a little bit of flexibility. We've been building strong partnerships with nursing schools and other educational institutions. Through preceptorships and extra training, we give students a firsthand look at hospital life. This alignment helps us attract new hires whose values match ours.

**JHM:** *What's next for you and HCA Florida JFK North?*

**Vertuno:** When I started as CEO, our primary focus was on mental health services. Over the last three and a half years, we have developed an array of services that align with the growing needs of our community. We have seen an increase in surgeons and patients who recommend our facility. All of these are key to the success of the organization. And now we have committed leaders who will help drive this growth even further.

This progress is a testament to an excellence-always culture that is seriously raising the bar for patient care. I'm excited about our hospital's future and confident in our ability to position ourselves as a competitive force in the market, continuing on this remarkable journey.