



The Respiratory Therapy Impact Series



Part 3

Elevating the RT in Your
Organization: The Importance of
Career Ladders and Career Paths

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1. Getting Started

This toolkit will help respiratory therapists learn the following:

- A. Understand, evaluate, and articulate the value and primary benefits of implementing a structured clinical ladder program in respiratory care departments.
- B. Understand what career pathing is and how it can extend a respiratory therapist's skills and growth both professionally and financially.
- C. Gain insights from real-life examples of clinical ladder and pathing programs for respiratory therapists.
- D. Identify opportunities for specialization and leadership roles within healthcare and explore strategies for respiratory therapists to effectively pursue and excel in these pathways.
- E. Explore potential opportunities for a respiratory therapist to transition from clinical practice to executive leadership (C-Suite).

2. Unlocking Growth: The Importance of Career Ladders and Career Paths

As a respiratory therapist interested in advancing, it is important to understand the difference between career paths and career ladders.

Career Paths can help respiratory therapists identify where they want to be down the road in their career. Career paths refer to the various directions a respiratory therapist can take throughout their professional journey based on personal interests, goals, and skills.

Career paths can:

- **Inspire Long-Term Vision:** Help therapists and students see growth potential and opportunities in the field.
- **Prepare for Industry Trends:** Prepare therapists for emerging roles like telemedicine and healthcare innovation.

Career Ladders refer to the structured progression of roles and responsibilities within the field, and typically within the same department, with clear steps for professional growth.

Career ladders can:

- **Guide Career Planning:** Clarifies steps to reach specific roles or specializations.
- **Encourage Skill Development:** Emphasizes certifications, advanced credentials, education and advanced degrees, and other experience for career growth.
- **Increase Engagement:** Shows pathways to leadership, clinical roles, or academia and clinical educator roles.
- **Demonstrate Professional Value:** Highlights respiratory therapy as a dynamic, impactful

The above image shows the myriad of different paths a respiratory therapist can take to achieve their career goals. Most respiratory therapists begin as student assistants or student technicians, progress to be a respiratory therapist, and then potentially become clinically specialized (e.g., neonatal care, transport medicine, adult critical specialties, etc.) and/or pursue one of many possible career tracks. Respiratory therapists can follow their passions and provide tremendous impact and diversity of perspective in these roles.



3. Growing Your Team with a Career Ladder

Career ladders – also sometimes referred to as clinical ladders – provide respiratory therapists with a clear and structured path to advance their practice, education, and achievement within the organization.

Clinical ladders were originally developed as a tool to recognize and retain nurses. Broadly speaking, most clinical career ladder models are designed to move from being a novice, to being proficient, to being an expert.

What are the benefits of a career ladder?

- Supports professional growth and development
 - Encourages continuous learning through certifications, advanced degrees, and training opportunities to see where you may be within this ladder.
 - Enables career progression to specialized fields (e.g. neonatology, pulmonary function tests)
- Can improve patient care and outcomes
 - Promotes higher competency and expertise which improves patient care and outcomes
- Can improve staff satisfaction and retention
 - Helps ensure people have a purpose in direction
 - Helps reduce burnout and turnover
 - Provides a sense of purpose and direction
 - Increases marketability and job security
- Impacts organizational culture
 - Improves how respiratory therapists are seen throughout an organization and the value they bring to patient care related to clinical excellence, professionalism, and leadership.

Career Ladder Levels:

Traditionally, career ladders are differentiated by levels:

- Respiratory Therapist I (novice beginner)
- Respiratory Therapist II (experienced and competent)
- Respiratory Therapist III (experienced and proficient)
- Respiratory Therapist IV (expert)

Of note, each level comes with advancing requirements which need to be met. Generally, the requirements are unique to each organization and role. Most career ladders are also made on a point system and pay increases with advancing levels.

Variations can include graduate RT, RRT, and Clinical Expert. Beyond this, once in the RRT role, respiratory therapists can become a PEAK I and II. Each level will come with a pay increase and likely professional development funds.

Challenges to Implementing and Sustaining Career Ladders

Embarking on a career ladder is an exciting step and the following challenges should be considered in the planning process:

- Finding organizational support and advocates can be difficult but is critical.
 - Look into the nursing career ladder at your organization and see how you can tailor it to your respiratory therapy career ladder.
 - Conduct a financial impact analysis with your financial or HR team. Look to literature to determine how much of your respiratory therapy staff is at each level.
- Ensuring compensation alignment with expectations:
 - As part of the financial impact analysis, it will be important to ensure compensation matches an increase in expectations. This should be reviewed frequently to ensure it is up to date.
- Fostering engagement and participation:
 - Encouraging staff to actively participate in the career ladder can be difficult if the process feels unclear or inequitable.
 - To sustain engagement, organizations must establish transparent processes, provide mentorship opportunities, and ensure fairness within coaching and development programs.

Additional Considerations for Rolling Out a Career Ladder

- Be ready and willing to make changes. Frequent changes are not uncommon; consider using a “Plan-Do-Check-Act” (PDCA) cycle to evaluate what changes have to be made.
- Some staff will want to participate and others will not – that’s OK.
- Be sure to create a program that is ambitious but doesn’t deter people from pursuing it due to it being perceived as too challenging.
- Look at many different programs to determine which one is the best fit; different departments have different needs and there is no “one-size-fits-all” model.

4. Unlocking Opportunities for Growth in Healthcare Leadership

A career path is like a fingerprint in the sense that each person's journey is unique based on experiences and decisions that shape their trajectory. However, each person's journey involves some combination of experiences, decisions, and opportunities that shape their professional trajectory.

Below are key leadership skills, considerations, and actions for respiratory therapists to take when mapping out a career journey.

Key Skills for Leadership Opportunities:

Leadership & Strategic Thinking

- Respiratory therapists are ideal for serving in the C-Suite. An RT background can be foundational for leadership since RTs work in all areas of a hospital/clinical setting and often many areas outside of a hospital/clinical setting as well.
- Focus on the key skills you are gathering to advance in your career path.
- The experiences of an RT lead to visionary thinking, crisis management skills, and experience leading through change.

Financial Acumen

- Financial performance will speak volumes. Budgeting, cost control, and understanding of healthcare economics are important skills for RTs to have experience with.
- Budget basics can be learned at any level.

Communication & Negotiation

- Active listening is one of the best ways to be engaged – when you listen, you learn.
- Building relationships with stakeholders, staff, and patients is critical.

Operational & Clinical Knowledge

- Healthcare is constantly changing, so it is important to have a deep understanding of healthcare systems, quality assurance, and patient care.
- Understand your organization's strategic initiatives and key performance indicators, even if they don't relate to respiratory therapy. At the state and national level, learn more about the legislative agenda, state-wide initiatives and CMS.

Change Management & Innovation

- Drive change, embrace new technologies, and improve service delivery.

Ways to Continue your Professional Development:

There are many options to continue to grow professionally. Doors to advancement open when you are growing in knowledge and performance.

The What?

- Continue to acquire skills, knowledge, and experience.
- Stay up to date with industry practices, innovation, and research.

The Why?

- Never forget the “why”; don’t lose sight of the reference point for why you do what you do.
- While it’s important to think about the next step, ensure you are also serving in the moment. Don’t let your goals distract you from the work you’re doing today!
- Focus on the skills you are gathering.
- Center yourself on your purpose: Put the patient first and everything else will follow.
- Better outcomes demonstrate commitment and opens doors for new opportunities.

The How?

- Be sure to prioritize education, on-the-job learning, self-directed learning, and networking to continue to broaden your career path.

Mentor Networking Tips:

Being a mentor and having a mentor are valuable at all stages of your career.

- Find a Mentor:
 - Connect with leaders in the field and learn from others.
- Networking Opportunities:
 - Join professional associations.
 - Attend conferences, workshops, and leadership forums.
- Seek Executive Leadership Training:
 - Enroll in specialized leadership programs for healthcare professionals.

Opportunities and Challenges:

The healthcare industry is challenging. For years we have continued to see costly care, but RTs bring a unique perspective to this problem and understand how to navigate the healthcare system.

Opportunities:

- Unique perspective as an RT in senior leadership
- Increased demand for healthcare leaders with clinical expertise
- Ability to influence patient care and operational improvements at a system-wide level

Challenges:

- Navigating the healthcare industry
- Finding value adds
- Understanding there are multiple lenses to look through
- Moving out of your comfort zone

5. Key Takeaways & Next Steps

A career path taking a respiratory therapist to the C-Suite is achievable with the right combination of experience, education, leadership skills, and strategic networking.

As a respiratory therapist you can achieve a role in a different career pathway and continue to use your RT skills and stay connected with the RT profession even as an executive.

Key Takeaways:

- Advancement requires continuous education, skill development, and mentorship.
- Pursuing leadership roles in healthcare allows RTs to influence both patient outcomes and organizational success.

Call to Action

Start planning your career path today by setting goals, pursuing further education, and seeking opportunities, which provides tracks for academic education, research, and leadership development. The institute addresses key leadership challenges and essential skills, as presented by experienced RT leaders, educators, and researchers.

**For more information on the contents of this toolkit and
The Respiratory Therapy Impact Series visit
www.aarc.org/the-respiratory-therapy-impact-series**