

FIRST-TIME CEO

Ghazal leads collaboration for patient-centered care*As president and CEO of Healthcare Leadership Council, Maria Ghazal unites health care stakeholders***By Michael Berman**

The health care industry is fraught with complexity and fragmentation, and patients can seem left out of the picture. But more than ever, industry leaders are advocating for patients, and Maria Ghazal, president and CEO of Healthcare Leadership Council (HLC), is one of them.

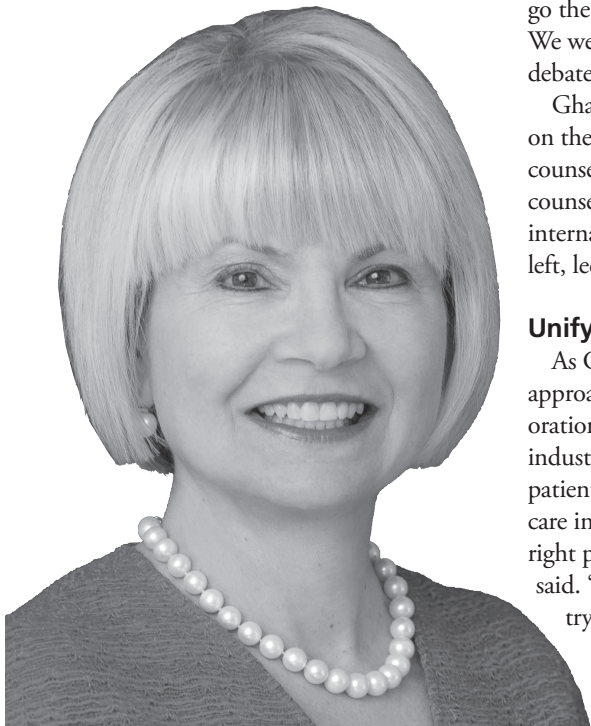
With 30 years of deep experience in health care advocacy, Ghazal, a member of the CEO Update Roundtable, puts patient-focused health care issues at the forefront by building unity among stakeholders.

“Our role (at HLC) is to look at the wider picture and then find common ground on policies that will directly help patients. Our members all play a critical role in patient care, and that is their common bond,” Ghazal told CEO Update.

A dedicated search committee

When Mary R. Grealy, the longtime leader of HLC, announced her retirement, the group’s executive search committee reached out to Ghazal to gauge her interest in becoming the new CEO. This committee included HLC board members and other influential industry figures.

“The individuals on this committee and their companies are very dedicated members. That was very inspiring to me,” she said.



Ghazal took the helm at HLC — an association of CEOs and C-suite executives from all health care sectors looking to shape the industry’s future — in January, following 19 years at Business Roundtable.

Finding focus

Ghazal came to Washington, D.C., in the 1980s wanting to work on Capitol Hill. She holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and a master’s in public policy from Georgetown University. Ghazal hit the “jackpot,” she recalled, by securing a position with the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York. Ghazal worked with him for four years.

Ghazal went on to work for two private-sector companies, holding positions in government relations and policy while earning her law degree from American University Washington College of Law at night.

During this time Ghazal found her niche. “I started to focus on the health care issues. It’s a major cost for employers to provide health insurance coverage to employees and their families,” she said.

Ghazal’s first association position was as one of the health care leads for the American Benefits Council. She then accepted a position at the Business Roundtable. “I was recruited to go there specifically to lead health care issues. We were gearing up for the Affordable Care Act debate,” she said.

Ghazal was eventually promoted to roles on the senior management team, first general counsel and then senior vice president and counsel. “I managed the policy experts, both internal and external. And then I also, before I left, led membership,” she said.

Unifying HLC

As CEO of HLC, Ghazal takes a patient-first approach to leadership that facilitates collaboration among several areas of the health care industry. “Our focus at HLC is what’s right for patients, and how do we get the entire health care industry to come together to say, This is the right public policy position for patients,” she said. “We’re an organization that is very much trying to come together.”

To build unity at HLC, Ghazal emphasizes the importance of hearing her community members’ voices. “I recently

spent six months meeting with every member. And then I sent out a survey with a couple of quick questions, including what attendees thought of the first big (annual) meeting,” she said. “And I very specifically asked, ‘Who’s missing at this table? Who would you like to see here?’”

Her listening tour revealed a desire to expand membership. “There is a willingness to make our tent even bigger to include not just our legacy members, who continue to be on the cutting edge of patient care, but also new companies who are expanding the reach of treatments in innovative ways we couldn’t have imagined years ago,” she said.

Meaningful communication initiatives

Effective communication is essential to building unity, so Ghazal is spearheading new initiatives to improve stakeholder communications.

“There’s a real opportunity here to use more modern-day technology on the communications front. So, we’ve brought on an expert to lead those efforts,” she said. HLC recently hired Sean Brown as vice president of communications. Brown previously led public affairs and digital strategy at the Federation of American Hospitals.

Ghazal and HLC are tactical when it comes to advocating for patients. “HLC can’t just talk about platitudes, we need to be involved in shaping policy that will have a direct impact on patients,” she said. “Some of the areas where we have engaged this year include accelerating the adoption of value-based care, addressing the impact of social determinants of health care, and increasing access to telehealth, all with the common theme of addressing affordability and accessibility.”

Pro tips

For those looking to step into a C-suite role, Ghazal emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships.

“So much of life, and particularly Washington, D.C., is valuing your relationships, keeping up with your relationships and making sure that your relationships are on both ends, not just who can help you, but who you can help as well,” she said. “It’s rewarding to see how much colleagues still appreciate that I was a good mentor and a good colleague.” ■