

Joe Sweet: serving patients with the support of our strong Cleveland Clinic team

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Mr. Joe Sweet is Director of International Patient Experience, Cleveland Clinic. As a busy leader who is often travelling for work he enjoys time spent outdoors to relax himself; running, cutting the grass, walking the dog, riding bike, playing ball with his kids. He enjoys running outside a few times per week to clear his mind and re-energize (*Figure 1*).

Mr. Sweet enjoys rock'n roll and is a fan of Bruce Springsteen's music, and is a part-time guitar strummer and want-to-be rocker. He is currently finishing Bruce Springsteen's autobiography "*Born to Run*". "*I enjoy learning about Springsteen's tough childhood environment and upbringing, the challenges, and how he overcame his difficulties to follow his passion of creating inspirational lyrics and rock-n-roll music.*"

Of the many business and healthcare books on Mr. Sweet's shelves, James A. Autry's "*The Servant Leader—How to Build a Creative Team, Develop Great Morale, & Improve Bottom-Line Performance*" on how to lead by serving others, is the most impactful to him. "*The people who impress me most follow the characteristics outlined in this book and I skim through it periodically to realign and rebalance myself.*" Mr. Sweet tries to live as a serving leader.

Surrounded and inspired by business people

Growing up the youngest of a four-kid family, competing with his siblings, figuring out how to make a buck by delivering papers, cutting lawns in their neighborhood, or washing dishes at party center, Joe Sweet was inspired by those who took a risk, rolled up their sleeves, and were able to develop and grow something that showed financial return—the entrepreneur.

When Mr. Sweet was between 10–15 years old, he had a neighbor across the street named Jack Shannon. Jack was an older and somewhat stoic gentleman with a beard and Mr. Sweet helped him with his yard. "*He worked me pretty hard, but during breaks he would tell me about his interesting childhood. It is a long story, but he dropped out of school at age eight, joined the circus, and travelled the country with the circus until his mid*



Figure 1 Mr. Joe Sweet.

teenage years. After the circus, he shared how he worked for a garbage collection company that would go around to businesses each day and pick up the waste in the business' garbage cans. He figured out that creating a larger metal 'dumpster' that could be leased to the business and emptied once per week would be a better business model. In summary, he executed this idea, grew it, sold it to a large waste collection company, and became a millionaire. I liked the sound of this, but still have not figured out my 'dumpster' idea yet. I share my ideas with my wife... and as a motivational and influential leader herself, she tells me to keep my day job."

Inspired by business people in his younger years, Mr. Sweet was told that he has the traits to become a good businessman. Then he went to school for it, learning the fundamentals of business. "*And now I do it for Cleveland Clinic and I love it.*" said Mr. Sweet.

Experience in Cleveland Clinic

In September of 2016, Joe Sweet shifted to his global leadership role at Cleveland Clinic. Prior to this move, he served as Category Manager of Sourcing & Supply Chain Management, Director of Operations & Business Development Wellness. His current role is Director of International Patient Experience, Cleveland Clinic.

Interview questions & responses

AME: *What attracted you to Cleveland Clinic?*

Joe Sweet: In addition to being born at Euclid Hospital, which is now a Cleveland Clinic hospital, as a young boy I was exposed to the power and respect of Cleveland Clinic through family members and friends who worked for Cleveland Clinic. However, the quality and global impact of Cleveland Clinic had the strongest impression on me between the ages of 17–21 when I had a job as a limousine driver. Through my college years I had the opportunity to drive many patients and families from around the world to and from Cleveland Clinic. It was through this experience where I gained an appreciation for the reputation and international draw of Cleveland Clinic. Also, while driving many Cleveland Clinic leaders I had the opportunity to talk with them and they provided me a better understanding of the expansiveness and complexity of the operation, and most importantly, I was exposed to the quality, integrity, and compassion of Cleveland Clinic leadership.

Experiencing this diverse global population of patients and learning about their cultures, families, home countries, favorite sports teams, foods, and their gratitude for their clinical team at Cleveland Clinic provided me a great appreciation for Cleveland Clinic. I remember thinking (and I still do) Cleveland Clinic lives by its tagline “Every Life Deserves World Class Care”.

In summary though, I thrive by the challenge, competition, creativeness, analytics, and teamwork that goes into formalizing and executing strategically beneficial agreements and managing meaningful relationships. And though Cleveland Clinic is a global not-for-profit academic medical center, its mission and values are clear and it operates lean with an efficient, accountable, innovative, and performance-driven business culture. I am strongly attracted to this.

AME: *How would you interpret the mission/ideal for Cleveland Clinic?*

Joe Sweet: Cleveland Clinic is a “Patients First” organization. Our vision is to be the world’s leader in patient experience, clinical outcomes, research and education. To support our “Patients First” focus and our vision, we enable and encourage a culture based on the values of Quality, Teamwork, Integrity, Innovation, Service, and Compassion. I see these values being demonstrated daily through our interactions with each other as caregivers (our term for

employees) and with patients, families, guests, and external partners. To add to this, Cleveland Clinic truly has an innovative and curious workforce and we strongly promote and reward cutting-edge thinking and execution, always looking for new and better ways to operate... which relates directly to improving the care we provide our patients.

AME: *Can you give us a general picture of the office of International Patient Experience? What’s the main duty for this office?*

Joe Sweet: The objective of our International Patient Experience team is to initiate, assess, establish, and strengthen global patient experience relationships and agreements which support the highest-quality and consistent patient care globally. We desire to learn and innovate with new approaches and partners in providing exceptional patient experience. We also represent Cleveland Clinic as the leader in delivering the optimal patient experience through continuous training, measurement, advisory services, and leadership support. It is our desire for our patients to experience exceptional service, clinical outcomes, respect, clear and open communication, and empathy no matter what Cleveland Clinic facility or Cleveland Clinic affiliate facility they may enter around the world.

AME: *Are there any challenges during your work in this department?*

Joe Sweet: Challenges are what draw me to international operations. Working with partners from around the world presents challenges related to distances, time changes, language, and cultural considerations, to name a few. As Cleveland Clinic has a global brand and reputation and is on the cutting edge new clinical, operational, research, technological or education-based initiatives, we have many requests from organizations around the world who would like to collaborate with us. This is a good problem to have, but also poses the obstacle of efficiently and effectively determining which partnership opportunities are truly and strategically beneficial for Cleveland Clinic and the potential partner. Vetting a new potential partner and a related market can take significant time and effort to get to know the partner and their business, develop a trust, understand the potential scope of the relationship, whether our respective clinical or operational team has the interest and capacity to support it, and how the business and financial agreement would be established. We also need

to understand and evaluate the risk/reward of Cleveland Clinic's appetite to enter a new market and how we may enter it. These are some of the fun challenges and big decisions which are part of our international business development craft.

AME: *What do you think attracts the international patients to go to Cleveland Clinic?*

Joe Sweet: International patients prefer Cleveland Clinic for several reasons, but I would say the quality of our outcomes and patient experience are the primary drivers. Cleveland Clinic is consistently ranked high in U.S. New World Reports and the international patients who have come to us for many years share their positive experiences with their family and friends, who many times will also begin to come to us. Since the 1940s–1950s when Cleveland Clinic began to establish its global relationships, we have seen continued year-over-year growth in international patient visitors from many countries. In addition, we train many international clinicians who either continue working for us or go back to their home countries and request guidance from or refer their complex patient cases to Cleveland Clinic. Cleveland Clinic is a truly a relationship-focused organization and through the nature of our work we develop a strong and trusting bond with our international patients, physicians, embassies, or referring institutions. Whether international patients are visiting us in Cleveland, Ohio, Abu Dhabi, UAE, Weston, Florida, Las Vegas, Nevada, Toronto, Canada, or soon one of our new international sites in London or possibly China or other countries, we make it easy for our international guests with a high-touch, culturally appropriate, and personalized experience prior to, during, and after their visit with us.

AME: *Does Cleveland Clinic have any plans to cooperate with hospitals in China recently? And in which area?*

Joe Sweet: Cleveland Clinic has interest in expanding into China with the right partner(s). We likely have interest in the more populated markets of Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Hong Kong to name a few. We currently have relationships in various stages and we desire to work with high-quality Chinese institutions whom align with our values, quality expectations, innovation and vision but also have the ability and influence to effectively gain Chinese governmental support, approvals, and financial backing if necessary.

AME: *Working as an administrator in healthcare field, do you have any special experience, compared to the other field? Any similarity or difference?*

Joe Sweet: I have worked in healthcare and in private small and large business and there is diverse knowledge specific to clinical operations, quality, safety, patient care, technology, organizational structure, costing, healthcare culture of service, employee engagement, and more healthcare-specific skills and experiences which support a successful healthcare administrative business career. In the end, however, I believe that working as a healthcare professional or a professional in any other field, you are going to deal with people and how well you are able to communicate and work with those other people will be the key to your success.

AME: *Can you talk a bit about the philosophy of hospital management in Cleveland Clinic?*

Joe Sweet: Cleveland Clinic is a physician-led, team-focused, institute-structured organization. What this means is each of our major institutes, structured around an organ system or medical condition, is headed by a physician leader who has the administrative support of a lead administrator and a team of focused operational and clinical team members. To support our "Patients First" focus, we enable and encourage a culture based on the values of Quality, Teamwork, Integrity, Innovation, Service, and Compassion. These values are consistently and frequently communicated and recognized by our leadership and demonstrated daily across all departments. Specifically, it is expected that all of our caregivers follow a standard communication approach with each other, with our patients, and with all guest who follows these key steps and is based on empathy:

- (I) Acknowledge the other person;
- (II) Introduce self and role;
- (III) Use person's preferred name (if unsure use Sir, Madam, Miss);
- (IV) Offer to resolve the concerns or forward to the appropriate person;
- (V) Communicate empathy;
- (VI) Use common courtesies.

AME: *What do you think is uniqueness of Cleveland Clinic both in the clinical care delivery and hospital-running experience?*

Joe Sweet: Similar to a well-run corporation where

performance, customer service, accountability, and teamwork are a focus, Cleveland Clinic operates in similar fashion. Though our caregivers may have healthy debates about different ways to operate or solve problems, our caregivers are provided the safe environment to speak up as well as the motivation and support to pursue and move their ideas ahead. Most importantly though, is we are all aligned on the core mission of “Patients First” and everything we do is tied to taking better care of our patients. Having this commonly understood direction allows us to prioritize initiatives which are most important. In addition, there is a healthy level of competition between our various departments and institutes which helps drive our continuous improvement. In the end, we are all part of one strong team and will jump in to support each other in serving our patients better.

AME: What do you think others can learn from Cleveland Clinic in terms of patient care delivery and management system?

Joe Sweet: I think there is much others can learn about Cleveland Clinic’s operating model and patient care delivery, but if I narrowed it to one main thing, I think employee engagement is most important. You can have beautiful buildings, procedures, expertise, and best technology and equipment available, but if your employees are not happy and fulfilled with their roles and careers, the system will struggle and patient care delivery will suffer. We are hearing this term “engagement” more and more these days, but it truly is critical to a smooth-operating business. I like to think of an engine with many moving metal parts and gears. If the teeth of any of those gears are not “engaging” with its counterpart, that engine will likely not run well, or run at all. In a similar fashion, Cleveland Clinic is extremely focused on keeping our operating engine well fueled, oiled, maintained, and running smoothly. We do this by measuring our employee engagement (annual survey, leadership reviews), understanding the current challenges around lower engagement areas, and implementing programs to support improved engagement. Some of these employee engagement programs may revolve around health and wellness initiatives, career-development and education of our caregivers, or leadership and team dynamics of a specific institute or department. There is a direct correlation of employee engagement to patient experience and if our employees are not engaged, our patients’ experience will not be as positive as it could be. Employee engagement is a top

priority of ours and should be a priority of all organizations if it is not already.

Expert introduction

Joe Sweet, Director International Patient Experience, Cleveland Clinic, spearheads international business development activities aimed at sharing Cleveland Clinic’s patient experience journey across the globe and supporting the Office of Patient Experience in achieving their strategic objectives internationally. He supports Cleveland Clinic’s international programs through affiliations, advisory arrangements, and various new ventures where Cleveland Clinic is expanding or plans to expand globally.

Work History

- ❖ Director Operations & Business Development Wellness @ Cleveland Clinic
- ❖ Category Manager, Sourcing & Supply Chain Management @ Cleveland Clinic
- ❖ National Sales Manager @ General Electric
- ❖ Black Belt—Six Sigma @ General Electric
- ❖ National Ski Patroller/Outdoor Emergency Technician

Education

- ❖ 1992–1996 Bachelor of Science (BS) in Operations Management/MIS @ Miami University
- ❖ 2000–2003 Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Business Administration, Management and Operations @ Cleveland State University

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Footnote

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