

## **Lesson's Learned From a Dean's Mentored Leadership Development Program**

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*From June 2005 to June 2006, I shadowed Dean Perman (College of Medicine) as part of a mentored leadership development. The following are insights that I gained during this experience.*

### **Background**

When I was first introduced to the concept of shadowing an administrator at the University of Kentucky Medical School, my initial reaction was disbelief that a power individual would permit me to “tag along after them” on a regular basis or what I could gain professionally. This was an interesting reflection on my own skepticism. Upon reflection, I realized I first began to appreciate the value of the shadow experience through my conversations with Dr. Lois Nora who as an Associate Dean in our College of Medicine, shadowed the President of the Ohio University. Dr. Nora is now President and Dean of Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. A second insight was gained during my activities as a members of a Dean’s Search Committee. Here, I was charged with obtaining further information on a candidate who had shadowed the President of the University of Georgia as an ACE fellow. The impact of that shadow experience on this particular candidate’s career was clearly demonstrated by both the rapidity with which the President returned my phone call and the enthusiasm with which he described the qualifications of the candidate. It was with these latter thoughts in mind that I quickly seized the opportunity to shadow our new dean, Dean Jay Perman. My goals for this experience were to determine what a position such as Dean of a Medical School entailed on a daily basis and to identify the leadership characteristics that are critical for success in a similar type of administrative position. I would then critically examine my strengths and weaknesses to determine whether I possessed the essence of these

characteristics that I could then refine with the aid of additional leadership training.

In establishing our shadow program, Dr. Perman and I considered the possibility of a time intensive, 2-4 week program versus a 1 year program comprised of 2-3 meetings per week. Given my research and teaching responsibilities, we chose the 1 year alternative. In addition to allowing for flexibility with respect to my time, it also provided me with the opportunities to follow the progression of several ongoing projects, probe Dean Perman’s insight on a number of issues, interact with other administrators including deans of other colleges and the associate deans of our college and reflect on a multitude of lessons as they presented themselves. Of these, the most clearly presented leadership skills were those that encompassed 1) listening, 2) using a systematic approach, 3) setting the tone, 4) focusing on the big picture and 5) advocating.

### **The Lessons Learned**

***Listening.*** When meeting with an individual or group of individuals who have approached Dean Perman with a particular problem, he often initiates the meeting with a tone of listening. In this mode, the individual(s) become comfortable with expressing their views and with the idea that Dean Perman wants to hear them. This initial phase is then followed by a question and answer session that finally leads into either resolution of the problem or a promise issued by Dean Perman to “do some more listening”.

An example of the value of effective listening was presented in a series of meetings that pertained to planning a new health science complex at the University of Kentucky. This effort was led by Dr. Perman and involved participation of the Deans and Associate Deans of the Colleges of Nursing, Allied Health, Dentistry, Public Health..... The value of this action by an effective leader is illustrated by the following. In “The Collaborative Leader” [1], the author states that leaders who do not listen will push the strong people away and will find themselves surrounded by those who are inept, yes-people. Unfortunately, there are too many of these examples in many academic

settings. On the other hand, the author of "Team of Rivals: The political genius of Abraham Lincoln" [2], has concluded that much of the success of President Lincoln stemmed from his ability to listen. When asked why he had chosen such difficult people who were also his known enemies to serve in his cabinet, he answered that they were the best people he could find. It was through his keen listening skills that he was able to direct much of the energies of this highly charged group of men, towards the goals of the greater good of the nation.

***Using a systematic approach.***

During the first few weeks of shadowing Dean Perman, I began to gain an appreciation of the number and extent of highly complex problems that a typical dean of a medical school faces on a frequent basis. While contemplating how an individual may initiate an approach to these types of problems, I heard another key phrase, "using a systematic approach". At the core of this approach is the same problem-solving technique used by most basic science and clinical faculty wherein one begins to grasp the many facets of the problem only upon systematically breaking it apart into its individual components. A key factor that is crucial for making this approach effective is the use of measurable outcomes that allow for a quantitative assessment of the current status and accurate projection of future goals. During the past year at our College of Medicine this process has been facilitated by not only highly skilled internal advisors, but also effective outside consultants.

***Setting the tone.*** A leader of any organization is presented with the opportunity to set the tone of its working environment. It is my view that the best leaders set a tone of optimism, a willingness to succeed and an appreciation of all individuals who are engaged at multiple levels within the organization. An excellent example of "setting the tone" was provided by the White Coat Ceremony that welcomes the incoming class of medical students. Here, the message to the students was that we, as faculty, have chosen you, the students because we believe in your ability to succeed and will be here for you as you continue to flourish in a challenging, but

satisfying career. An additional emphasis was placed on what it means to be a professional. For example, as a physician, you and your actions define the white coat, the coat does not define you. During the following week as I was engaged in similar activities that were focused on welcoming the incoming class of graduate students, I incorporated many of these ideas as I addressed the students. The success of these attempts were apparent in the positive feedback that I received from both my colleagues and our current graduate students who attended the sessions.

Within an academic setting, the best leaders also set a tone that fosters a highly collaborative environment in which individuals are encouraged to interact with individuals housed either within their own college or with those housed within other colleges. A major goal of Dean Perman at the College of Medicine is to break down the "silo mentality" that often exists amongst both clinical and research faculty and to facilitate our collaborative efforts with our colleagues with other colleges via his positive and supportive interactions with their respective deans.

***Focusing on the big picture.*** I had not fully realized that people used entirely different processes for problem solving until I became engaged in the Circles of Power Leadership Program offered by the University of Kentucky. While some individuals engage first in "information gathering" techniques as they are presented with a problem, others focus on the "big picture" in order to incorporate this new information into the overall goal or mission of the program. Given that most effective leaders are intuitive thinkers who more readily grasp the big picture, their major challenge lies in communicating this larger view to others who instinctively remain entrenched within the details. This is often facilitated by the development of a mission statement and strategic plan that are accurately reflections of the organization. These tools may then serve as frequent guideposts to be used for charting the course of appropriate action. In addition, the effective leader must surround themselves with those who use differing styles of problem-solving and use their listening skills

to gather, incorporate and build upon all of the information available.

**Advocating.** An effective leader is one who delights in the success of others and seizes upon every opportunity to share these successes with whoever is willing to listen. A true leader will not compete with those with whom he or she is leading. In the current academic climate of public wariness, budget uncertainties and increasing global competition, the role of advocate plays an ever increasing important and demands that the leader grasp every opportunity to inform the public and the legislators of how their individual missions serve the greater good of the public that they serve. Towards this end, the message that the leader delivers must be consistent, accurate, easily understood and inspiring.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, I strongly encourage both individuals who are considering leadership positions and their respective deans to participate in an individual mentored program. The experiences that I have gained have been invaluable and have greatly assisted me in setting my future career goals. These types of leadership programs aid not only the individual, but also the community at the University of Kentucky as it will increase communication between faculty and administration, aid in faculty retention and develop faculty who can more effectively serve as leaders in national, university and college-level committees.

<sup>1</sup>Lombardo, S., Pascarella, P and Frohman, M., *The Collaborative Leader: Asserting yourself appropriately.* Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Goodwin, D.K. *Team of Rivals, the political genius of Abraham Lincoln.* 2005.