

A Female Dermatologist's Guide to Being a Leader

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"Leadership is not about titles, positions or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another." ~ John C. Maxwell

Being a physician equips us, in a way, to naturally become leaders. Many of the traits needed to exemplify excellent patient care are also traits that are seen in strong leaders. Not only that, we are expected to step into our roles as archetypal leaders. We are held to a higher standard in serving. Medical decision making is not the only thing expected of us. For example, many of us serve on dermatologic or medical committees, volunteer in our communities, or manage clinical personnel.

The reason why leadership is something we should talk about is because it's something we all face as physicians. The leadership role we encounter is not limited to the business realm of being a manager or owner, it exceeds that.

A friend recently loaned me an article from the Harvard Business Review. The article's author outlined multiple leadership styles that were frequently seen, (i.e. coercive, authoritative, democratic, etc.) However, they found that the best leaders were not reliant on one style. In fact, they frequently used different styles at different times and scenarios. (Goleman, D. (2000) Leadership that gets results. Harvard Business Review, March-April.) What did I take away from this? As leaders, we have multiple key traits and should be able to know when to use them. We should be able to match them to individual situations and different people. We need to be *dynamic*.

Be a Visionary and Bright Light

Leaders are visionaries. Pull your team together around a shared vision or goal. Show the initiative to be ready to seize new opportunities. Paint your vision of a great tree and allow them to draw in the leaves. This will help team members share your vision and call it their own. How about that for a strong bond?

Visionaries also turn negatives into positives. Every negative situation has a silver lining. Even awful ones in the workplace. Why? They provide an opportunity to grow or fix something. Turnarounds don't happen until something bad has happened. Successes typically don't happen without a few bumps in the road. So be a bright light when the lights go out and show by example the great things that can happen as a result.

Another way to be a bright light is to praise. Know when to praise publicly and privately. Negative feedback may be necessary, but can leave people drained or resistant to change. Positive feedback and praise are often needed first to acknowledge someone's contributions to a team. Who doesn't want to feel appreciated or valued? (*By the way, I appreciate that you're reading this article when you're so busy!*) My husband taught me his technique as a project manager. Positive feedback first, then negative (i.e. correction or instruction), then positive feedback last - he has coined this: the "ice cream sandwich approach."

Be a Human Not a Humanoid

Leaders do not need to be cold, sterile, or demeaning. They can be empathetic, honest, and a safe haven.

For example: How do you respond when someone is going through hardship? Do you let them know how it negatively impacts their job? Or do you support them so they can get back to their job? Either or both responses may be applicable given the situation, but this example is meant to spur some internal thought.

Empathy is a skill we hone with our patients, but it's equally as important to use it outside of our clinical scope. This ability helps us gauge others' emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. It can be helpful in instances of individual turmoil or navigating system related friction.

Just as we don't avoid the truth with our patients, we can be honest as leaders. Apologies are allowed. Honesty can serve to acknowledge a difficult situation and yield fruit.

Lastly, we are a haven as leaders. I went around my office and asked a few people what they thought a good leader should entail. I was most impressed when someone answered "haven," because it instantly made me reflect on some of the best leaders I worked with. Great leaders often exhibit this ultimate skill. They are a place of safety when needed, of growth and recovery. A source of nourishment to grow despite mistakes and conflicts.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Most Objective and Fair of Them All

The counter side to being human is to be objective and fair. Not letting our emotions and projections cloud our judgment. Often, we need to take a step back. Sometimes we have our "go-to" person (or people) and have another person who we don't trust as much. The reasons may be complicated. That can sometimes lead you into a rabbit hole when you're holding everyone accountable. For example, sometimes you crack down (or avoid cracking down) on the negative Nancy more than the others. Dish things out as fairly as possible. Frequently take a step back to re-assess if you're being fair.

Accountability is a difficult subject but is made more complicated if fairness and objectivity are breached. Team members should have clearly defined roles in your organization. Don't assume that because their title is XYZ and their job description says XYZ; that they know to do XYZ. Clearly communicate their roles and explain your role. When you give a rule or have expectations, everyone (including yourself) should be held accountable.

Empower Your Team to Grow

You're likely reading this because you are a self-directed and motivated learner. Your growth didn't stop after you achieved your goal of applying to medical school or finishing training. Instead, you kept at it. Growing in different vectors. This is an admirable trait that physicians have, and I strongly encourage that you keep it. Great leaders are not born overnight and in fact, seem to continually seek improvement.

Just as you grow, encourage your team to seek growth, - both together- in terms of interpersonal bonds and strength, and individually – in terms of independent growth.

I've been fortunate enough to work with amazing leaders. The trait I most admired about my Chairman (correction, Chairwoman!) was her ability to empower each of us individually. She would support us through any endeavor that encouraged personal growth. She turned us from residents into potential legacies.

Step Back to Review Your System

A trait that distinguishes leaders is their ability to look at an overall system and gauge interactions. Systems encompass a wide range of definitions, but can include human interactions, work flow, policies or organization models. If you give feedback, take the opportunity to receive it. Then, synthesize where the disconnect is, take two steps back to look at the systems picture, and offer solutions to help equip the other person you're working with.

For example, an issue of a squeaky wheel may actually be a car alignment issue instead of a wheel issue. (Okay, maybe I'm not a car expert, but you get my gist.) Yes, you need to be concerned with the outcome (i.e. a patient, committee, revenue goal) but also with the organization or team assemblage it took to get there.

An anticipated outcome of many systems is the potential for conflict. We are dealing with humans after all (humanoids if you haven't had your coffee yet), who individually all have a complex set of emotions and thoughts. Conflicts can happen and are obtrusive to systems flow. The ability to resolve conflicts is key to a harmonious team.

Emotional Intelligence is Key

Dictionary.com defines emotional intelligence as a 'skill in perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions and feelings'. There are many traits positively associated with emotional intelligence. These include social and communication skills, amongst others. But I think of emotional intelligence in yet another light, *being intelligent about your emotions*.

For example, when I started this article I had a pang of anxious fear. What if this article would be rejected by the reader because I'm not a renowned leader or because they know of my failures. But, here's the kicker, no one told me that- *I thought it*. And I had to hit the 'ignore' button so it wouldn't weaken this article.

What are your insecurities as a leader? Are they valid? Every person reading this has been in a funk, gotten frustrated or angry, gotten negative feedback at one point (hello, the dreaded negatives section on the evaluation form). Don't project your own emotions or frustrations onto your team, particularly not with your communications, actions, or decisions.

Bossy Pants or a Servant Leader

Yes, sometimes you need to be a stereotypical bossy pants. But keep in mind this can hurt morale if used often or in a derogatory way. Directing a person is not the same as demanding. But in times of a crisis or emergency- this style of leadership is sometimes needed.

Instead, a servant's outlook is a great way to earn your stripes as a leader. Think of the best leaders you've worked with. They likely exhibited this trait, they were willing to get involved in any task or role. Just like those seasoned leaders, don't be afraid to get dirty!

So, there it is- my tips for leadership. You already have these traits, just bring them to the forefront of your leadership thought process. Trust that *you* know what to do and when to do it. Your skill set as a physician has already empowered you to be an excellent leader.