

VIEWPOINT

Dissecting the Important Difference Between Good Surgeons and Good Leaders

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I have had an unconventional career. My professional life began as an assistant professor of surgery at Tufts University School of Medicine almost 20 years ago. I was an active surgeon and faculty member who always accepted roles of increasing responsibilities. I was promoted to associate professor and began working with medical device companies as an educator and adviser. I served as medical director for a start-up company and then became the full-time corporate chief medical officer (CMO) at Covidien, which at the time was the world's third largest medical device company. In 2015, Covidien was acquired by Medtronic in the largest transaction in the industry's history. I had a front-row seat to this process, played an active role in it, and remained employed by Medtronic for 4 more years.

In total, I spent 12 years as a senior business executive holding leadership positions at the highest levels of both companies. I managed large budgets, extensive global teams, and complex problems, including patient safety, physician-industry relations, patient access, and the balance between innovation and evidence-based medicine. I interacted with Wall Street and had the opportunity to work with the brightest minds in business, government, and health care. I hired and managed countless medical officers, statisticians, economists, safety associates, and other key personnel in medical and regulatory affairs. During this process, I obtained key leadership skills in business operations, performance management, professional development, team building, and high-performance organizations. The people I worked with taught me how to lead, and I ended up teaching many others how to be effective leaders.

Throughout this real-time training, I was privileged to maintain a presence in clinical surgery as well as my academic title. Tufts Medical Center and Tufts University remained flexible and helped manage my conflict of interest without incident. Six months ago, I voluntarily left my CMO position and returned to academia to accept the position of chair of the Department of Surgery at Tufts Medical Center and Tufts University. These events have afforded me an important observation.

Several years ago, one of the people who reported directly to me (an engineer) told me that our health care system needed to be industrialized. He suggested that the rigor applied to the planning, design, development, and monitoring of things, such as cars and cellphones, should be applied to patient care. Cars and telephones are built with standards that mandate little variation and high reliability. Do patients not deserve the same? What about the role of leadership in all of this?

Surgeons lead every day. During our daily activities, we lead core teams of people who are vital to patient care. It is inherent in what we do, and patients rely

on it. Core team leadership in patient care is relatively straightforward, because health care professionals have complimentary skill sets and our roles are generally well-defined. But the complex problems we face in health care today beyond minute-to-minute patient care require a more sophisticated version of leadership and a skill set distinct from leading core teams.

The companies I worked for introduced me to a leadership strategy known as *leading with questions*. Books¹ have been written on this topic, but for me, it is about 1 premise, which entails directly involving the people one manages in everything one does. This is pretty simple! A leader solicits these individuals' thoughts, their opinions, and the ways in which they agree and disagree with him or her. She or he involves them in the design and development of a strategy and the setting of goals to monitor progress and solicits their views of each other, the rest of the organization, and their opinions about the leader. The leader involves them in their own professional development planning and inquires about their work-life balance. To lead with questions, a leader simply soaks up everything the people working for him or her have to tell him or her... always.

Leading with questions for me encompasses 3 basic things that, to this day, I ask everyone on my team every time I meet with them. First, "How are you doing?" Second, "Are you on a path to achieve our team goals this year and your career goals beyond that?" Third, "Is there anything more I can be doing to help you?" The job of a leader, beyond a core team, is to find the holes, fill the gaps, and be transparent about what one can deliver and when and what one cannot deliver and why. And that is it. In the era of increasing physician burnout, uncontrolled health care costs, and declining hospital profits, I cannot think of a more important time to embrace a new approach.

I stumbled on this and incorporated it for 1 reason: I had no idea what I was doing when I was first hired as a CMO. I knew even less as I was promoted to manage new areas with unfamiliar complexity. I quickly figured out who could fill my gaps, and I worked hard to solicit their advice. I listened and learned every day and incorporated broader thinking into my evolving strategy. Together, with the people on my team, we constructed a vision and mission that helped us achieve our goals. We also established a set of guiding principles that assured the continual input and well-being for each and every employee. I led with questions every day and ensured everyone working for me did the same with their teams. I operated under a metric of zero regrettable loss of talent, and we overachieved at just about every goal we set.

When I was asked to interview for the role of chair of the Department of Surgery at Tufts, I was initially skeptical of my candidacy. I did not fit the mold of a chair of

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a downtown Boston academic surgical department. But as I began to learn more about the opportunity, I realized that my leadership skill set was more relevant than any of the gaps on my curriculum vitae. My institution faces challenges and opportunities that are not unique. These problems will not be fixed, nor all the opportunity realized, with outdated command-and-control leadership styles. We need surgeon leaders who can evolve from core team stewardship toward leading with questions. The issues we face in health care will not be solved for us. We must become part of the solution and embrace a new approach that has us caring as much about the opinions and well-being of our teams as much as we care about the opinions and well-being of patients. It is clear to me that a team-centered approach based on leading with questions would do more to enhance patient experience than any other intervention.

The medical device industry has had its ups and downs. But it has reliably provided us with innovative technology that improves

the way we take care of patients. The industrialized approach to the development of these products has also brought expertise in organizational leadership and performance management that cannot be translated fast enough into hospitals given what we all face. For example, it is common practice in industry to objectively identify high-potential future leaders and invest in their development with activities such as executive coaching and 360° performance feedback. Hospitals, physician organizations, and medical schools would be smart to fund such initiatives as investments in the future of their organizations and even the future of surgery. We have plenty of good physicians. But the challenges and opportunities in today's health care environment require that we assimilate these learnings and provide resources to these thoughtful programs, all while we work to begin dissecting the important difference between good surgeons and good leaders.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Published Online: July 1, 2020.
doi:10.1001/jamasurg.2020.0805

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Dr Tarnoff reports previous employment with Medtronic

compensated with salary and equity and current consulting to Medtronic, for which his department receives consulting fees.

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