BY MISTY HUMPHRIES, MD ON BEHALF OF THE LEADERSHIP AND DIVERSITY COMMITTEE

Two years ago, I wanted answers to the question, “How does leadership style change as one moves through his or her career?” The question resonated with the Leadership and Diversity Committee, and I was awarded the SVS Women’s Leadership Training Grant. I spent time with three female leaders at different levels in their careers to see how they lead. It was an amazing experience and I am forever grateful to Drs. Wei Zhou, Division Chief, University of Arizona-Tucson; Melina Kibbe, Chair-Department of Surgery, University of North Carolina; and Julie Freischlag, CEO and Dean, Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center for their time and openness regarding leadership styles, career priorities, changes they made over time and mistakes they made. Here is what they had to say.

Q. What is the greatest part of being a leader?

A. Dr. Kibbe: By far, being able to develop people. One of the things that gives me the greatest pleasure is helping others reach their dreams and follow their passion. As a leader you have the ability to develop programs and people. When you support others the way they need to be supported you see their passion thrive and become a success.

Q: How did you decide you wanted to take the next step as a leader?

A. Dr. Freischlag: I knew there were changes I wanted to make for the better of the organization and that to do things the way I saw as better, I would need to be in the leadership role. It’s especially hard when you are in a place where you see change that needs to be made, but you do not have the power to make those changes.

Q: How did you establish yourself in your new leadership role?

A. Dr. Zhou: Coming into a new hospital as division chief, I first made sure to be clinically present. You need to establish your reputation all over again at a new place. I brought in new procedures and I made sure that we reached out to the community to let them know what was changing. I was also very selective of the first cases I did. You have to have good outcomes. This ensures confidence in others to refer you harder cases and allows you to build a program.

Q. As a female leader, what is the most significant barrier you have faced in your career?

A. Dr. Kibbe: I have been extremely supported. There may have been issues of subconscious or implicit bias that I did not know were present. I did have challenges in my career early on of folks trying to understand how I, as a surgeon scientist in a very clinical department, was contributing to the mission of the institution. I really credit my mentor. He established clear boundaries with my job so that others understood the pressures and expectations that were put on
me from the scientific side.

Q. What organizational culture did you change the most when you came into your role? A. Dr. Freischlag: I think in many of my roles I have been looked at differently because I was a woman. When I went to lead at a very male-dominated institution, I had to work through that. Imagine if a man had to go to work every day and work only around all women, that’s what my position was like. As a CEO, many think they can do the job better than I and there’s a lot of scrutiny. Ultimately, I bring culture change by being nice and expecting that from those that work with me. I set that as the minimum expectation, and I hold people accountable. I also remind everyone that we work for patients and focus them on the expectation that first and foremost we will provide exceptional patient care.

Q. What is the leadership skill you spend the most time working on?

A. Dr. Zhou: You have to learn to work with people and figure out how to approach each individual. I try to identify each individuals' strengths and weaknesses and address these, so they feel appreciated in the institution.

Q. If you could give your younger self advice, what would it be?

A. Dr. Kibbe: Follow your passion and good things will happen. I sometimes wonder where my optimism comes from, as I am always happy. I think that happiness translated into some of my success.

Dr. Zhou: Spend more time getting to know people. I was so focused academically that I didn’t do much networking. I was very focused on my research, and a broader network would’ve helped me.

Dr. Freischlag: Don’t feel as if you have to apologize for anything. I am glad I did all the things I did and had the failures I did. When you fall down, get back up.

Over my year-long leadership quest, I learned I have many of the characteristics of a great leader already, and that we all refine those skills over time. I also learned to give myself grace as I develop my leadership style because we are all a work in progress.

Article Date: Monday, September 16, 2019
Author: Re-posted from the September 2019 issue of Vascular Specialist
Tags: Vascular Specialist
Article Type: Article