Leadership Corner: Challenging the Process

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October, 2016 - This is the second column in our series highlighting the evidence-based behaviors and attributes that define great leadership. We are focusing on five “practices” routinely embraced by successful leaders and discussed in “The Leadership Challenge” by Kouzes and Posner. The five practices were outlined in August’s Vascular Specialist. This month we are focusing on the second practice, “Challenging the Process: The Courage to question the status quo and thoughtfully test new paradigms.” I interviewed Dr. Freischlag about leadership and communicating a shared vision.

Q: Can you tell me a little about the vision you brought to Johns Hopkins and University of California, Davis in your leadership roles, and how you were able to share a vision that could appeal to a diverse community and bring people together?

JF: The visions for Hopkins and UC Davis were a bit different, but the process was very similar. Both institutions needed a vision focused on culture change to accelerate transformation as contemporary departments of surgery, schools of medicine and health systems. The keys were outlining a brief yet compelling vision i.e. “excellence in clinical care, research, and education” at Hopkins, and “leading person-centered care, accelerating innovative research, re-imagining education, improving population health, changing culture and promoting sustainability” at UC Davis.

It was crucial to engage the faculty and really listen to them in developing a common vision. I also made sure the vision was communicated frequently and understood by all divisions at Hopkins and at all departments and centers at UC Davis. Once we had a common set of expectations, I felt it was important to let the faculty work on how best to fulfill the vision. This strengthened ownership in the outcome.

As we grappled with the challenges, such as adapting to new work hours or driving toward more diversity, I found it was very helpful to align strategies to the common vision we established. When you have a solid set of principles and a strong vision in place, you find you never want to let a good challenge or disaster pass you by as they become positive catalysts for alignment and change! I also want to emphasize the importance of investing time in real strategic thinking and planning. I organized full-day sessions at both Hopkins and UC Davis, and at UC Davis insisted that division directors, department chairs and center directors learn how to do the same for their own divisions.

Q: I imagine when you took on your leadership roles there were pre-existing visions and reinforcing cultures. Did anything surprise you along the way?

JF: I really want to emphasize the importance of culture. Culture is the most important thing – it can make or break you, and leaders play a major role in setting the tone and nature of organizational culture. Change is often a big fear. If your culture is to avoid change, or see it negatively, it is very tough to advance. If your culture is to embrace change and any fears, it becomes your ally and a path to innovation. Making the time to listen to those fears is critical so that you can address them and assure everyone can see themselves in your vision and plan. I also want to emphasize the importance of being patient, alert and visible! Leaders really need to model the culture and behavior they expect from others. I met with each division initially in their own offices so I could get to know where everyone worked. I learned a lot about my team and their cultures just by seeing what is exhibited around the office.

A couple of other points: Not everyone is going to agree with you, so you need to develop a team you trust and one whose members will tell you the honest truth about what they are observing, even if controversial. I also think you should give everyone a chance – many people will pleasantly surprise you when given an opportunity to lead. When I left Hopkins, my faculty said, “You had our backs and made us better.” To me, that is perhaps the most important measure of success in leadership.

Q: SVS has had 70 presidents, and you are the first and only woman on that list. Did you have a specific goal you wanted to achieve during your time as president? JF: I wanted to do a really good job so other female leaders would
have a chance to be president in the future. As I had done at Hopkins and UC Davis, I started with a strategic planning and visioning process for the SVS. This proved very helpful in guiding the SVS in the future – setting and aligning to priorities such as diversity, young surgeons, community practice, etc., and helping decide on resource allocation. This also helped the SVS staff to plan forward for several years at a time.

Q: How do you nurture the next generation of leaders that will sustain and also evolve your vision?

JF: I like to practice “inclusion excellence” – including all different kinds of people with different perspectives and skills sets on my teams at work, a matrix or quilt of sorts, so myriad ideas can always be shared and better decisions will ultimately be made. I learn so much as a leader when I include many different people on my teams.

Q: I always experience you as happy and energized. What’s your secret?

JF: There is no denying that you bring your personality to your leadership. It defines your style, and we are all a little different. Self-assessment of your style and strengths is a fantastic way to start. I did the exercise from StrengthsFinder by Tom Rath and my five best qualities are futuristic, strategic, positivity, individualization and achiever. I find I get more energy if I stay positive. I am also an extrovert and get lots of positive energy from meeting new people and being with people. I also spend five-10 minutes each morning when I wake to be thankful for my family, my health and my situation; that starts the day off well and makes all possible.

Q: Can you recommend three books our SVS members should read about leadership?

JF: “Drive” by Daniel Pink, “Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life” by Stewart D. Friedman and “The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life” by Benjamin Zander and Rosamund Stone Zander.

Q: If you were to write a book about leadership, what would be its focus?

JF: My book on leadership would be about taking chances and being resilient.

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