



LEADERSHIP: Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership

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I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Cynthia Shortell, Professor and Chief of Vascular and Endovascular Surgery, and Chief of Staff of the Department of Surgery at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

Dr. Shortell, a native New Yorker, earned her AB from Dartmouth College and MD from Weill Cornell Medical College. Upon completion of training that included a general surgery residency, a research fellowship in hematology and a vascular surgery fellowship at the University of Rochester (URMC)/Strong Memorial Hospital, she was invited to join the URMC faculty. She remained in Rochester until 2005, when she accepted a position with Duke as chief of vascular surgery.

During her tenure at Duke, Dr. Shortell has garnered an increasing number of leadership roles by virtue of her integrity, insight and vision. Most notably she has served as the program director of the Vascular Surgery Residency, vice chair of Faculty Affairs and currently as Chief of Staff for the Department of Surgery. She has served as a principal investigator in numerous clinical trials, and she has published more than 100 articles in peer-reviewed journals, 32 book chapters, three books and countless abstracts and presentations. In addition to her brilliant clinical and academic career, Dr. Shortell is a leader in the changing face of our specialty. As a longstanding, dedicated and active member of the Society for Vascular Surgery, she has served as chair for both the Committee on Women's Issues and the Education Council.

Q: At what point in your career did you know that you wanted to take up a leadership role?

A: I don't believe I can define a specific moment. When I was in residency it was quite unusual for a woman to train in a vascular fellowship, not to mention lead in surgery. I was more in survival mode then, not even contemplating a future in leadership. There were no female surgeon role models for me. But, I did regard one of the older general surgeons I worked with as somebody I could truly look up to. I considered him my role model, a mentor who looked out for me, though he didn't act as a career advisor.

Q: How did you build up to your current role over the years?

A: Although I never had any formal leadership training, I've maintained a strong academic presence in our field for many years due to my research interests and national societal memberships. My formal leadership experience developed as those societal involvements deepened and my institutional commitments broadened. At Duke, I collaborated with research teams, became involved in the process of applying for grants, led our vascular laboratory as its medical director, served as the program director of our vascular residency and advanced our section status to the

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rank of division. Over time, by accepting and successfully managing increasing responsibilities, I have built a reputation as an individual who is reliable, committed, collaborative and effective. As a result, when the position opened up, my name was among the potential candidates.

Q: According to the surveys, the qualities that make a credible leader include: honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, competence, intelligence and broad-mindedness. That seems like a very general statement. What would you say your credibility depends on? Do you think you can narrow it down?

A: Candor and forthright communication are very important. Fairness is key. People need to know that regardless of your personal feelings on an issue, you will act impartially and not allow emotion to cloud your judgment.

Q: What is the most important skill any successful leader should have, in your opinion?

A: A common, significant obstacle to a leader's success is lack of empathy, unwillingness to listen to others' points of view. Organizations are comprised of people with various concerns, abilities, needs and biases. Successful leadership requires the skill to acknowledge and appreciate the different perceptions held by those individuals. If one is unwilling to evaluate a problem from another perspective, then resolution is highly unlikely and your group will be subject to constant conflict. In my opinion, empathy is definitely an essential skill for problem-solving and, thus, leadership success.

Q: The image of a macho leader is still prevalent in our culture. How did you manage to stay true to yourself in your current role?

A: Remaining true to yourself requires first and foremost knowing and accepting who you are. I believe striving to become the very best version of yourself is a lifelong pursuit that requires effort and frequent reevaluation. Hopefully, experience brings wisdom and that wisdom should help you realize that flexibility in dealing with individuals is an essential characteristic for strong leadership. A leader must be approachable, open-minded and willing to listen. You must recognize who thrives when nurtured and who succeeds under more rigid guidance. Maintaining relevance and longevity in one's career requires foresight and the resilience to adjust your course when necessary. It's unnecessary, and often counterproductive, to maintain the harsh leadership style of an unapproachable façade. Quite the opposite — I think it's important in this day and age to demonstrate that nice and nurturing do not at all imply a weak, indecisive nature. I believe employing empathy requires strength and confidence, and does not sacrifice excellence or your core values.

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