

**Mentoring for a Career in
Surgical Leadership
or
Being a National Leader in Surgery:
Roles, Responsibilities, and
Opportunities**

J. David Richardson, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Professor of Surgery
University of Louisville

DISCLOSURE

I make no claims regarding my knowledge or abilities as a mentor.

I have written on the subject and tried to be a “mentor” to hundreds over a 40+ year career.

My views only (I represent no one else).

Personal Experience as a Mentor

- I never had a true mentor, but have learned (and continue to learn) by watching the successes and failures of others
- Good mentors may not always be readily available, but one can still succeed
- Cultural differences and personal factors may lead to variance in the mentor-tyro relationship

My Concerns About “Mentoring”

- One minute internet search yielded over 100 books and hundreds of papers (TNTC) on mentoring
- Too much emphasis and exposure may actually cheapen the value and make the term a “cliché”
- In the ultimate silliness about mentoring, our medical school now requires that all Associate Professors and below have a mentor

Cautions

- Effective mentoring can be difficult for all
- One may never find an effective mentor, but push ahead and succeed
- More than one mentor is often needed: different skillset, different needs, needs may depend on where you are in your career

Outline

- History (who was Mentor?)
- Responsibility of a Mentor
- Responsibility of a Mentee
- Path to Leadership
- Pitfalls along the Path
- Challenges of Leadership
- Opportunities for a Leader

Mentor In History

- In the Odyssey, Odysseus (King of Ithaca) leaves Mentor in charge of education and supervision of his son, Telemachus
- Mentor has morphed somewhat from teaching and supervising, to include an advisor, friend, wise counsellor, coach, etc.

Responsibilities of a Mentor

- Being an effective mentor can be difficult at times
- Must be unselfish and objective
- Must maintain objectivity and honesty without destroying confidence: can be a fine line to walk
 - Mentors who are not honest may create unrealistic expectations: “follow your dreams” vs. “grounded in reality”

Where Mentors May Fail

- Not adequately informed or educated, but advise anyway
- Well-meaning, but not well-connected (one value of meetings like this is networking – over time those interconnected circles keep expanding)
- “Shelf-life” failure – having once been a “player” may not make you currently relevant

Responsibilities of Mentees

- Expectations from a mentor must be reasonable
- Can you help me get a Chair job?
- Could you help be get appointed to Chair of XYZ committee?
- Can you help me get a podium paper on that prestigious meeting?

Coaches Don't Play the Game

- A mentor may be remarkably effective, but ultimately the mentee must assume the mantle and determine their own destiny
- A basketball coach never makes a basket; ultimately the players win the game or not

Important Elements in the Path to National Leadership

- Find a “Yoda” (effective mentorship)
- Protect your home turf
- Visibility
- Grit / persistence
- Avoid pitfalls
- Luck

Find a “Yoda” / Effective Mentorship

- At the risk of being very dated, Yoda was the mentor of the young Jedi master in the early Star Wars movies (millennials can Google it)
- Yoda may come from the Yiddish word “yodea” or “one who knows”
- Yoda was wise and all-knowing, but demonstrated to his mentee (Young Skywalker) three features
 - He knew how things worked
 - He was not afraid to criticize shortcomings
 - Ultimately was a champion for the positive qualities of his protégé

Finding a Successful Mentor for Leadership

- May be difficult (few Yodas!)
- Seek multiple opinions, if necessary
- Don't fear reaching outside your institution or comfort zone for counsel (most leaders are flattered)
- "Coaching services" are often available; other training (e.g. MBA) may be useful

Unpleasant Advice

- I am blessed/cursed with forthrightness
- My advice may not be what one wants to hear, but is never selfish
- Negative feedback may, on occasion, be the best one ever receives
- My approach is to discuss options; ultimate decision is up to the mentee
- Seek a mentor who hopefully has wisdom, openness, unselfishness, and honesty

Protect Your Home Turf (Field)

- In sports, it is crucial to protect your home field/court advantage
- Some would-be leaders actually appear better on the road than in their home institution
- Positive image at home is enormous asset and local problems may undo national aspirations

Shore Up Your Base

- Be a local leader
- Be an active surgeon
- Carry your load
- Avoid pitfalls (more later)

Visibility and Service

- Difficult to advance without prior visibility
- Develop a strong “work product”
 - podium presentations, poster presentations, abstracts, thoughtful discussions, etc.
- Faithful attendance at meetings

Disperse Your Talents

- Do not be afraid to stray from your disciplinary comfort zone
- Venture outside your specialty meetings (trauma, oncology, etc.)
- Regional meetings
 - Network and learn new ideas
- Leaders need to ideally be broad-based in their awareness

“It’s a Long Way to the Top”

- With apologies to rock group AC/DC
- Occasionally, leaders reach the pinnacle rapidly
 - Obvious brilliance or innate penchant for leadership
 - A breakthrough or innovation that catapults one forward
 - Being anointed by a well placed advocate
- For most surgeons, leadership opportunities are derived from a bottom-up approach
 - Dedication and commitment to the organization or institution

Organizational Opportunities

- Many are mundane (equivalent of “grunt work” or “scut work”)
- Committees are often boring and not very productive
 - Be prepared, attend and participate, and other opportunities may follow
- ACS – Chapter activities
- ABS – Guest Examiner

Grit

- Angela Duckworth in her book, “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance” opines that “grit” or perseverance trumps inherent talent
- While the word “grit” has been overworked a bit, ascending to leadership often requires hard work
- The work is often not glamorous

The “Work” is Real

- Most leadership roles require literally thousands of hours away from home or your day job
- Decide if this is something you want
 - Does your passion, dedication and commitment equal or outweigh the time spent away from home, loved ones, golf, vacations, etc.

Gladwell “10,000” Hour Concept

- In “Outliers,” Malcolm Gladwell promoted the concept of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to be really good in your field; this has been questioned and doesn’t directly apply to our discussion
- However, most leadership requires work and time commitment

My Time Commitments

- 7 years on American Board of Surgery
 - Minimum of 15 days of meetings annually (360 hours x 7 = 2520 hours)
- 7 years of Residency Review Committee Service
 - Minimum of 12 days of meetings annually (2016 hours)
- 5 years as Secretary of Western Surgical Association
 - sit through every podium paper!
- American Association for Surgery of Trauma
 - sit through every podium paper!

The Undeniable Influence of Pure Luck

- “The harder I work, the luckier I get” or “Luck is the residue of hard work” are important aphorisms
- However, luck is important
- Important to simply be nominated for a position or to have an advocate at times
- There is a difficult balance between appropriate “self-promotion” and inappropriate “self aggrandizement”
 - Hard to advise on this issue

Contamination Theory

- Virtually every aspect of American life has writings on “contamination”
- In education theory, we think we know something, but don’t know where we learned it or how we know it. It just got there!
- Petri dish analogy
 - Open a Petri dish of agar and leave it exposed overnight
 - all kinds of stuff grows!

Contamination Theory and Rise to Leadership

- Our organizations rarely hire search firms (when they do, it is usually disastrous)
- Surgical leaders emerge by being seen, involved, participatory, using a combination of “hard/soft skills”, etc.
- No magic formula or “secret sauce”

Hard vs. Soft Skills

- Mid-career success
- “Hard skills” (scholar, scientist, prolific author, etc.) often open the door, but often “soft skills” are more important to close the deal on leadership positions
- Soft skills
 - Communication
 - Flexibility
 - Motivation
 - Appropriate patience
 - Persuasion
 - Team work
 - Etc., etc., etc.

Pitfalls on the Path

- There are situations that happen to potential leaders that may stall or kill advancement to leadership
- Accusations of misconduct may be deadly, but occasionally even whispers or rumors can be problematic
- Live a pristine work-place life
 - Good colleagues
 - Studiously avoid the don'ts (inappropriate sexual behavior, plagiarism, money stuff, etc.)

Roles for Leadership

- Why do I want to be a leader?
- Check a box on my CV or make a difference?
- Is my agenda reasonable or appropriate?

Fundamental Leadership Questions

- What type of organizations am I leading?
- What does the organization need?
- What type of leader to do I wish to be?

Type of Organization

- Scientific society: “steer the ship” and “stay in your lane” (science and politics are a toxic mix in my view)
- “Work product”: ABS, RRC have defined roles
- ACS must be able to respond to dozens of potential issues

Caveats for Organizational Leaders

- Be wary of personal “legacy” issues; sometimes doing a good job is enough
- Be careful of “mission creep” that may obscure the organization’s stated goals
- Outline goals that can be accomplished (I worry ACS takes on too many big undoable projects)
- In controversial areas, articulate the principles of the organization that are well founded while avoiding preaching

What Does the Organization Need?

- Stable – no major changes needed
- Minor changes or “tweaks”
- Major overhaul or changes (from afar, it appeared the ABS made major recent changes)
- Nimble leadership that may plan constructively for organizational goals while being reactive to rapid changes in landscape (think American College of Surgeons)

What Type of Leader Do I Wish to Be?

- In 1970, Greenleaf wrote an essay entitled, “The Servant as Leader” introducing the concept of “servant leadership”
- Stated simply, the leader was granted power by those she/he leads
- The commonly used business terms are “transformational leaders” or “transactional leaders”; e.g. “bottom up” or “top down”

My Opinion

The most crucial element of organizational leadership is to be a strong leader without allowing personal ego needs to subsume the welfare of the group.

Potential Steps to Success for Organizational Leaders

- Good alignment with executive staff
- In controversial areas, plan and prepare pre-meeting
- Seek input in advance from key members
- Develop a coalition of “thought leaders” to facilitate goals/agenda
- Anticipate opposition and allow candid discussion and input
- Explain position (if needed) to “outside” policy influences
- Don’t overreach (know when to quit)

Opportunity for a Leader

- Personal glory
- Effect change (remembering my caveat about need for a “legacy”)

My Change Efforts

- ABS Chair
 - I wanted the organization more “user friendly”. I generally failed.
- RRC Vice-Chair
 - I wanted to make major changes. I failed miserably.
- ACS Board of Regents Chair
 - I focused on rural issues/access to care and surgical training. Huge issues, but at least we initiated discussion.