

Physician leadership

Woo K T

ABSTRACT

Doctors, because of the nature of their training and their profession, have to be leaders. Subsequently, when they specialise, leadership qualities are even more important if they are to be effective in leading the specialty team. It is common knowledge that doctors have become leaders in various sectors of society. One of the fundamental advantages a doctor has over others in leadership positions is his basic training in studying and understanding human nature. With years of practice and experience, the doctor, a student of human nature, has a good grasp of human behaviour which enables him to become a better leader. The six universal and timeless characteristics of great leaders are: ability to share a vision, surrounding oneself with great people, ability to coach other team members, ability to focus on perfection, developing emotional intelligence and ability to train effective leaders. I would like to see three essential qualities in a strong leader: ability to secure an “envisioned future”, ability to sacrifice in order to cultivate loyalty, and courage to do the right thing and protect his people. An effective leader positions himself in a situation to ensure survival. Having secured the leadership position, one must take certain steps to strengthen one’s leadership so that it will survive. Six strategies from the Art of War by Sun Tzu which are of great practical value are: walk the ground, have trusted lieutenants, information gathering, confuse the enemy, win most while doing nothing, and that which is too good will not last forever. Sometimes we have to change in order to survive. We need to get rid of outmoded practices and shed old burdens to take advantage of the present. The task of exiting from leadership is facilitated if one has groomed a successor. The longer one is in a leadership position, the more difficult it is for one to step down. Some organisations retain old leaders as advisors or mentors. They

should be just seen and not heard and go about their work quietly, contributing to the department. A retired leader should be able to command respect from his peers and preserve his dignity.

Keywords: doctors, human nature, leadership qualities, physician leadership, strategy

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DOCTORS AS LEADERS

Doctors, because of the nature of their training and their profession, have to be leaders. Subsequently when they specialise, leadership qualities are even more important if they are to be effective in leading the specialty team. Apart from being awarded medical leadership because of the respect given to doctors in society, many doctors are also appointed to leadership positions for their service to the community. It is common knowledge that many doctors have become leaders in various sectors of society and many fields of human endeavours as leaders in charitable organisations, expeditions, business and politics.⁽¹⁾

One of the fundamental advantages a doctor has over others in leadership positions is his basic training in studying and understanding human nature. Because his training and profession demands an understanding and a necessity to deal with issues centred on the physical and social, as well as psychological nature of his patients and their relatives, he has a wide exposure to a whole gamut of human relationships and behaviours. This privilege held in trust, in terms of patient confidentiality, allows free and uninhibited disclosures and examination of patients in order to facilitate a correct diagnosis of the patient’s illness. The patient therefore presents his raw, undisguised personality and nature to his doctor in the course of consultation, and the doctor in turn gains insight and understanding of the patient’s disease in relation to his social condition. With years of practice and experience, the doctor, a student of human nature, has a good grasp of human behaviour which would enable him to become a better leader.

Department of Renal
Medicine,
Singapore General
Hospital,
Outram Road,
Singapore 169608

Woo KT, MBBS,
MMed, FRACP
Emeritus Consultant
& Advisor

Correspondence to:
Prof Woo Keng Thye
Tel: (65) 6326 6049
Fax: (65) 6220 2308
Email: woo.keng.thye
@sgh.com.sg

BORN LEADERS AND ACQUIRED LEADERSHIP

Some doctors are born leaders and many others acquire leadership qualities, and yet some others have leadership positions thrust upon them and they learn on the job. Whether born or acquired, these doctors become leaders, medical and otherwise, and are expected to possess certain leadership qualities in order to function as effective leaders. There are books written on how to become a successful leader, and one even reads articles from the internet listing the qualities of good leadership. The qualities of leadership also vary according to the nature of the job. In the case of a doctor, depending on whether he is leading a team of doctors in a clinical ward, the operating theatre or in a voluntary or mercy relief mission, various additional leadership qualities may be desired. A doctor may be appointed as head of a department or division, or he may be a chairman of a board, a director or chief executive officer (CEO). As he rises through the ranks and his leadership role changes and takes on a wider scope, his job becomes more demanding. Management or the Board would expect him to have a higher level of leadership qualities.

QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

Dr Philip Tusco of the Medical Board, Southern California Permanente Medical Group lists the six universal and timeless characteristics of great leaders.⁽²⁾

1. Share a vision
One has to understand the big picture, visualise potential of the medical group without boundaries, insist on excellence, and be intolerant of bureaucracy.
2. Surround oneself with great people
Strong leaders surround themselves with strong people.
3. Importance of physicians coaching other team members
Develop good team chemistry, respect for each other, reward success.
4. Focus on perfection
Great leaders focus on perfection. Do not lose focus by taking on too many projects at one time.
5. Develop emotional intelligence (EI)
This is defined as leadership competencies that deal with the ability to handle oneself and one's relationships with others. Physicians are not born with emotional intelligence. A leader must be competent with his own development first. Four dimensions of EI are:

- (i) self awareness
- (ii) self-management
- (iii) social awareness
- (iv) relationship management: ability to move people in a positive direction. More important to develop people than programmes.

6. Learn to multiply

The potential of the medical group depends on growth of leadership. Old house officer rule: see one, do one, train one. One's colleague will see how effective one is as a leader. Train them into effective leaders like oneself.

THREE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF A STRONG LEADER

I would like to see three essential qualities in a strong leader.

1. Vision

A vision remains only a vision. It is something one cannot grasp in one's lifetime. However, one can secure an "envisioned future". One should have a blueprint or a strategy to achieve it over a period of time. This is why one should secure a worthy successor in order not to lose one's legacy. Anyone can use a telescope, but to be able to focus it in the direction to see the "full telescoped view" or the "full house picture". That is the big picture one sees in the envisioned future.⁽³⁾

2. Ability to sacrifice

As a leader, one has to sacrifice oneself, be prepared to die for the greater good or the cause. One has to be able to take punishment, suffer, eat and sleep with the men; to know and understand the men so that they would also get to know and understand oneself. This will "engender loyalty". The men will then accept your command as you are one of them. They will obey and respect and will also be prepared to die with you.

Take one or two trusted men with you as it is lonely at the top. The leader is always lonely on the lofty perch, but the leader has to make his way up there. It is the only position to get a clear and unclouded view of things without influence from others.

3. Courage

A good leader must have the courage to protect his people, make sacrifices and "do the right thing". A leader has to be principled. He must have integrity, including the courage to relinquish his position. When faced with a crisis, he must be

prepared to “cut off his thumb to save the hand.” This is the ultimate sacrifice of a leader.

ENGENDERING LEADERSHIP

Having secured the leadership position, how does one retain it? This is what I term “engendering leadership”. One must have a strategy to engender the leadership position so that one can “sit on the throne for a longer period”. One must learn this strategy from “The Art of War” by Sun Tzu.^(4,5) The healing arts and the martial arts have three parallels:

1. The maxim of “the less needed the better”. This is the same for preventive medicine as well as conflict with the enemy in war. The ideal strategy whereby one could win without fighting, accomplish the most by doing the least. This is taken from Taoism, an ancient knowledge and tradition which fostered both the healing and martial arts in China.
2. Both War and Medicine involve strategy in dealing with disharmony.
3. In both, knowledge of the problem is the key to the solution.

Military action is important to the nation. It is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction. The ground means the location, the place of pitched battle. Gain the advantage and you live, lose the advantage and you die. Military action is therefore referred to as the ground of death and life. The “path” means the way to adjust to the situation and establish victory – find this and you survive, lose this and you perish.

Military action has parallels to the practice of Medicine. The ground is the patient and the disease he is afflicted with. As doctors, we have to assess the patient, perform the investigations and arrive at a diagnosis. The “path” is our management and treatment of the patient. If we take the wrong path, we lose the patient. This is a matter of life and death. When we translate bedside care of our patients to management of problems in the Boardroom as Directors or CEO, we notice the parallels with the practice of Martial Art and Medicine again. As doctors, we are trained to assess the patient and his illness through a process of history taking and physical examination. Then we investigate and come to a diagnosis, and after this, we prescribe the treatment to achieve a cure and eradicate the disease. In the boardroom, the same chain of events occurs from examination of documents, interviews, discussion, investigation and analysing the root cause of the problem and finally implementing the solution for the problem. This is the same as in military conflicts.

THE FIVE STRATEGIC ASSESSMENTS

Whether in War or in Medicine, we must engage five strategic assessments in the following areas:

1. The way
This means inducing the people to have the same aim as the leadership, so that they will share death and share life, without fear of danger. In medical leadership, as head, director or CEO, we do the same for our medical staff. The way also means humaneness and justice as the means to govern properly. When government is carried out properly, people feel close to the leadership and think little about dying for it.
 2. The weather
This means the seasons. In ancient China, many soldiers lost their fingers to frostbite and many died of plague. This was because of operations carried out in winter and summer. In a medical operation, timing is equally important. We must optimise the conditions for our patients and the medical staff performing the operation.
 3. The terrain
In a military operation, it is important to know the lay of the land, the distance to be travelled and to choose a direct or circuitous route. In Medicine, the terrain is the patient and his comorbidities. The surgeon and the physician must assess the patient and decide on the best line of management. The medical director, faced with a crisis, has to make crucial decisions during a disaster and deploy medical supplies and resources accordingly.
 4. Leadership
Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage and sternness. The way of the ancient kings was to consider humaneness foremost. Martial arts consider intelligence foremost – as this involves the ability to plan and when to change effectively.
 5. Discipline
Discipline means organisation, chain of command and logistics. Organisation means the troops must be grouped in a regulated manner. Chain of command means there must be officers to keep the troop together and lead them. Logistics means overseeing supplies.
- Every general has known of these five strategic assessments. Those who know and practise them will prevail. Similarly, medical leaders should also be aware in order to prevail.

THE ART OF WAR

The manual on the Art of War is very shadowy. Many concepts do not seem as they appear on the surface. Deception is often employed to camouflage. It is filled with paradoxes because it is built on Taoist teachings. To think that one knows and is aware of the Art is one thing. To practise or employ its principles while on the job is something else altogether, because one has to translate its teachings into the vocabulary of one's thought process. The manual is most gainfully employed when one is no longer aware that one is employing it. Truly one has to imbibe it into one's psyche in order for it to be phenotypically evident in one's thought process when engaged in the boardroom. It is a most difficult manual to master, as it involves thinking on one's feet to become fully operative. To succeed, one has to assimilate and re-synthesise it, and feed into one's psyche by translating it into one's instinctive behaviour.

Various books and adaptations of the ancient classic impart to the reader much food for thought and plenty of clever strategies. The reader is filled with knowledge which is confined to the realms of book learning. I have long thought about these strategies, and condensed it into the following which I try to impart to my doctor friends and colleagues. To take heed of half a dozen of these leadership strategies will already suffice for most of us.

THE SIX LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

1. Walk the ground
As a leader, you cannot be an armchair anatomist. You must turn up at the dissecting table to dissect your cadaver. A leader has to be among his people, at all levels and often, so that he can listen and learn at first hand in order to understand the problems, troubleshoot and prevent calamities. The people will also have easy access to his style and develop a bond with him.
2. Have trusted lieutenants
Always have a few trusted men who can form a think tank with you and offer even unsolicited advice so long as it is for the good of the organisation or the team. You cannot be present all the time and this will also allow you to focus on other important issues.
3. Information gathering
You must always have your ears on the home ground as well as the ground of your rivals or competitors. This will give you an accurate measure of events and problems, so that you can develop counter strategies and solutions. It is also useful to employ undercover agents to gather information and check on feedback received.

4. Confusion
Be prepared to send out occasional wrong signals to lure or confuse the enemy. Rather than use a direct route, the circuitous route may give the enemy or competitor a wrong impression and lead him away from your intended goal. The beating of cymbals and gongs may distract your rival while you are secretly exiting to another rendezvous to foil his plot.
5. Win the most while doing the least
The ideal strategy is to win without fighting. If you can win the battle while still in the boardroom without engaging in the actual battle, this means you are accomplishing the most while doing the least. This is the ideal situation in any battle.
6. That which is too good will not last forever
When you have won the battle and are sitting on your lofty perch surveying the defeated ones below, do not be content resting on your laurels. There are others coveting your position. Sooner or later they will come for you. While you are ahead, be prepared for a dignified exit.

WHY IS CHANGE IMPORTANT?

Many times, in order to survive, we have to start a change process. We sometimes have to get rid of old habits and outmoded traditions. This will allow us to be free of old burdens so that we can take advantage of the present. Change comes about when old leaders retire and new ones are groomed to take their places. This process of self-renewal will allow the organisation to adapt to changing times and enhance the chances of survival.

EXITING LEADERSHIP

A good leader should groom one or more successors to secure his legacy. Climbing up the mountain is difficult. It can be even more difficult making the descent. One may have to contend with slippery slopes. This task would be easier if one has groomed a suitable successor, so that transition can be phased in gradually and the old leader has time to adapt to his new status. The longer one is in a leadership position, the more difficult it is to step down.

Some organisations retain old leaders as advisors or mentors. They still enjoy a senior position but they should know how to conduct themselves properly and not sow discord or pose a threat to the younger leadership. It is even better if they are just seen and not heard. The retired leader then should go about his work quietly, contributing to the department acting as advisor and mentor. But at the end of the

day, the retired leader should still be able to command respect from his peers and preserve his dignity.

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The Singapore Medical Association will be presenting awards for the Best Research Paper published in the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) in 2008. All original research papers that are published in the SMJ during the one year period from January 1, 2008 to December 31, 2008 will be considered for this award.

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