Exploring Opportunities and Discovering a Career Path in Leadership

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Leadership - a seemingly simple act yet quite difficult to effectively execute. What makes a good leader? Is it innate? Or maybe it is acquired? Considering what to do with your future and even more so with your career, are sAome of the most thought-provoking questions one may ask whether it is during undergraduate school, during residency, or even in post-graduate years. It is hard to predict what someone will do in their career, as the future is unpredictable by its nature. However, one can explore his/her passion and goals and discover opportunities in order to transform “I do not know what to do when I finish my residency” to “I have an idea of what I would like to do.” Once an idea surfaces, the possibilities are endless.

Another important question is how much of our own personal qualities, beliefs and values influence our capacity to become genuine and effective leaders? Shamir and Eilam posited that “Authentic leaders do not take on a leadership role or engage in leadership activities for status, honor, or other personal rewards. Rather they lead from conviction.”1 This complex internal combination of values and beliefs could be innate or acquired, or more likely a combination of the two. Furthermore, our own experiences, beliefs, and value systems help craft our unique leadership skills. In addition, there are numerous ways to acquire and develop leadership skills. This article aims to identify various resources to assist in acquisition and development leadership skills during one’s academic career beginning in the undergraduate years, followed by medical school, residency training, and post residency years.

**Undergraduate Years**

The undergraduate years are a great time to kick-start and learn about the different ways of expanding one’s passion. Although discovering that specific passion or ambition for one’s profession can be challenging during the early years of his/her journey, it is not difficult to identify some areas of interests. There are a plethora of activities that can increase exposure such as joining clubs, volunteering, or getting connected with different committees in the school. The spectrum of potential exposures are virtually limitless and the outcomes likely to be rewarding. For example, holding a position in the student government on campus is a good start. Involvement in campus governance is linked to desirable outcomes for individual students as well as to positive contributions to the welfare of the campus community.2

Another invaluable resource that one of the authors of this article (MDC) found useful in her personal experience was to participate in international programs to gain exposure to international research, differing schools of thought and methodologies. The Minority International Research Access Program, a program supported by Fogarty International Center (FIC) and the Office of Research on Minority Health (ORMH), encourages under-represented minority students to pursue research careers and to broaden scientific training to include international health problems.3 This program provides undergraduate students opportunities to live and work in another country while conducting research. The exposure and immersive experience associated with this versatile program helps students learn about different cultures and people while gaining valuable experience in international research study. Experiencing the challenges of underserved areas, such as the obstacles to accessing health care and the impoverished living conditions, can lead to insights about the need for change. These kinds of revelations can be the foundation of learning and applying leadership skills, as through effective leadership, one can find a better way to make a positive difference. Such leadership may involve, but is not limited to, developing strategies, creating policies, and mobilizing action. All these can be constructive avenues to influence others to see the “big picture” and provide the essential leadership and guidance to make a positive difference.

**Medical School**

In medical school, some of these convictions may have already been molded, but there are still a number of ways to further secure leadership opportunities. One such opportunity is to obtain a dual degree: for example, a Medical Doctorate (MD) degree and a Master’s in Public Health (MPH). An MPH is a comprehensive way to learn about the epidemiology of disease and issues related to public health, including lack of access to medical care, health insurance, and poverty. Understanding the scope of a problem allows one to wonder, “What can I do to help?” Furthermore, an MPH can provide valuable knowledge about the significant health disparities not just in the United States but globally as well. Most MPH programs are currently categorized into tracks that include Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Environmental Health, Health Policy and Administration, and Social and Behavioral Sciences.4 An MPH also helps one to think about cost-effective strategies and implementation of those strategies on a population level.4 More information about various degrees in public health education is available at the American Public Health Association website (<https://www.apha.org/what-is-public-health>).

**Residency Training**

During the first year of residency, many physicians begin to feel that they are “officially a doctor” for the very first time. This by itself can be an overwhelming feeling; however, as a physician one is already a leader in most healthcare settings. Most resident doctors utilize their leadership skills in facilitating clinical care, for example, being the leader of a multidisciplinary healthcare team. Once the initial challenge of the new role is overcome, this role can provide an excellent opportunity to practice and further develop leadership skills like voicing concerns about patients’ care, being a mentor to medical students, and leading a team.

Clinical skills training is vital during residency, though development of leadership and administration skills is of parallel importance and should be included as part of the formal residency training. The authors of this article found that being part of the Patient Safety Committee at their training institution improved their leadership skills in the realm of patient safety. The committee’s goal was to create a culture of transparency in the hospital and to improve communication between trainees, nurses, patients, faculty and their families in order to deliver the best care available. The committee worked closely with the hospital’s Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Designated Institutional Official (DIO), Assistant Vice President of Clinical Services and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Patient Safety Education.5 The opportunity to see the full inner-workings and learn from the leadership administration of a healthcare institution was invaluable. As compared to being confined to working solely in one’s own department, exposure and participation in multidisciplinary activities provide opportunities to learn about system-based practice, multi-departmental communications, and learning from hospital leadership. Further, such opportunities provide a chance to meet and work with residents who are like-minded and possess the same passion to create change and make a positive difference.

While residency training provides a potential time for the development of leadership skills and practice of their application, most residency training programs lack formal teaching material and training that target leadership development. This was demonstrated by Moyhuddin et al. who expressed that instruction in psychiatric administration has lagged behind other developments in psychiatric training.6  In response to this challenge, graduate and post-graduate medical accreditation councils around the world have identified this need and formulated guidelines to incorporate leadership training into residency education.6 This gap has additionally been emphasized by several professional organizations throughout the world. The Canadian Psychiatric Association stressed training in the following areas of administration: organizational structures and change in mental health, models of mental health delivery, quality assurance, program development, conflict management and skills for team-building, and leadership and lifestyle management.6 Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and the National Health Services Institute for Innovation and Improvement implemented the Medical Leadership Competency Framework. The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) introduced the “System-based Practice" competency to confront the need for administrative skills training in residency.6 These implementations are crucial to the development of a trainee’s leadership skills.

In the final year of training, the chief residency position is an effective way to apply leadership skills and act as the liaison between residents and the program director and faculty. One of the author’s (MDC) experience as a chief resident consolidated both her inherent and acquired leadership skills during this period. She became fully aware that a good chief resident is a leader who is able to create a positive culture within the program where the residents’ needs are supported and their concerns are addressed. Under good leadership, the residents view their elected chief as someone who can help them when important problems arise.7 Furthermore, chief residents create a safe space for residents, facilitate participation, solve disputes, and improve the enthusiasm and morale of the residents.7

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is another venue to consider in the search for opportunities to develop one’s leadership skills. Many resident leadership positions are offered by the APA including Resident-Fellow Member Trustee (RFM), Assembly Committee of RFM’s, APA Representative to American Medical Association Resident-Fellow-Section, and Resident Representative to the Residency Review Committee (RRC).8 Details about each position can be found on the APA website: [https://www.psychiatry.org/residents-medical-students/residents/leadership-positions](https://www.psychiatry.org/residents-medical-students/residents/leadership-positions7).

**Post-Residency Years**

After residency training, if one wishes to continue a career in administration and clinical care, there are fellowships dedicated to advance leadership development. One example is a Public Psychiatry Fellowship, which is an excellent means of reinforcing leadership and administrative skills. Public Psychiatry Fellowship (PPF) is a 1-year specialized program for psychiatrists who are interested in working in the public sector. The core elements of PPF include an academic curriculum, applying the concepts of clinical care and management in field placements, learning about mental health administration and weekly supervision with a faculty preceptor.9 Such academic curricula address important topics including but not limited to: The American Welfare State and Public Mental Health, The Role of the Psychiatrist in Community-Based Services and Recovery and Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Fiscal and Management.9 Furthermore, other important aspects incorporated into PPF are cultural competence, integrated practice, population-based practice, evidence-based practice, quality assurance, and peer and family satisfaction.10

In conclusion, myriad opportunities are available for leadership development. Those trainees who are eager to lead, make a difference, or enact change may benefit from seeking out such leadership positions in their training programs, obtain mentorship, and being proactive and resourceful. A substantial number of opportunities can be useful during one’s career path. Even the smallest of opportunities can contribute to developing strong leadership skills. Ultimately, there is no single characteristic or activity that can prepare one to be a good leader. Rather, it is passion, enthusiasm, and the desire to enact positive change and being able to leave an indelible imprint for others to follow which contribute to creating a lasting legacy.

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