Excerpta Medica

The American Journal of Surgery

The American Journal of Surgery 191 (2006) 291–295

Presidential address

Redefining success as significance through leadership in the new economy

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Presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Midwest Surgical Association, Ontario, Canada, August 14–17, 2005

Abstract

This review re-examines our current definition of success in the current economic system and challenges the surgeon to play a significant part in role modeling and mentoring surgical residents and other healthcare professionals. Leadership skills are presented and implementation strategies are suggested.

Keywords: Success; Significance; Leadership; Mentoring

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Medicine and surgery are undergoing change from many directions and doctors and hospitals now attract more intense public scrutiny than ever. The Internet, malpractice concerns, residency training guidelines, and patient safety issues are just a few of the factors that have changed the way we practice medicine and how we are viewed by our patients. As an example, physicians can now limit their practice to inpatient or outpatient care with the introduction of hospitalists and the media depicts the patients as losers. The doctor-patient relationship deteriorates and the doctor becomes a stranger to a patient who is too often referred to as a consumer or an encounter. We are consumed by the endless paperwork, administrative hassles, bureaucracy, and additional federal mandates. In addition, a professional liability crisis is running rampant across the country combined with inadequate reimbursement, limited access, impersonalized processes, and burdensome documentation. We are not alone as many professionals in the business world are facing the same changes and challenges provided by a new economy. This new economy provides more prosperity and innovation, but results in increased financial uncertainty, productivity standards, and administrative oversight. Through it all, we struggle with our definition of success.

The media inaccurately describes a successful life for us to resemble a large container filled with houses, cars, clothing, conveniences, and other stuff. The more stuff you have in the container, the more successful your life has become. Things now define so much of who we are and what our lives are about. They become a substitute for significance and often contribute to the drivenness of our lives. We crave things that we don't really need or enjoy, to impress people that we don't really even like. We are drawn into believing the false premise that we will enjoy something more if we own it. A significant life, however, is a life that benefits others in the form of personal relationships and is measured by the number of people we have mentored and helped. This is the life that allows us to leave a legacy. At

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0002-9610/06/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.amjsurg.2005.12.001

some point we all decide which path to take, success or significance.

Some of you may remember a man named Robert Reich. He made headlines when he suddenly resigned as Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration. Reich loved his job and was arguably quite good at it, as evidenced by the country's economic prosperity at the time, but he left his post claiming that this life was consuming the even better work that he wanted his life to be about. He now mentors college students and went on to write a book entitled, *The Future of Success*. There he points out that currently, we have more money and more material things and are living better than we or our parents did a quarter century ago. Yet by most measures, we are working harder and longer and more frantically to keep up, and the time and energy for our nonworking lives is evaporating. The new economy he describes has brought us an increase in wealth, choices, and innovations, but keeping up with it all is leading to the erosion of our families. We struggle with the crucial distinction between "making a living and making a life" [1].

The new economy is requiring longer hours at work and family members are more often away from home. The typical American is working 350 more hours per year than the typical European, and more hours than the Japanese. Homes are vacant for longer periods of time during the day and fewer families can synchronize their schedules to dine together in the evening. Over the last 20 years, the number of families eating dinner together has dropped from 50% to 34%. Some families have remedied this situation with a weekly family meeting, which is organized much like a business project update meeting. And even when we are physically present, work continues to invade our family time through pagers, cell phones, instant messaging, and a vast array of technology designed to keep us in contact with our working life. We are all running faster to keep up with a higher standard of living and keep pace with the ever advancing new economy. The end result is stressed out couples who are too tired to communicate at the end of the day.

As we work harder and run faster, our homes have become small corporations. Past family responsibilities such as food preparation, cleaning, childcare, and even dog-walking are subcontracted out to cooks, maids, nannies, gardeners and other specialists. Business plans are developed, either consciously or subconsciously, which balance the cost and quality of the services purchased against the earning potential, time, and self-satisfaction of the affected family member in the workplace. The monetary and psychological return they get from working is higher than the cost to them of subcontracting. Sadly, families are not purchasing more leisure with their added resources, but instead buy more time to put into their work [1].

As buildings and fortunes are temporary, our goal should be to influence the future by investing in the people around us whether at work or at home. We must use our abilities as teachers, role models, and mentors as mentored individuals have an unpredictable potential for greatness. We can and must restructure our lives to be at our best at work and at home in the evenings and on the weekends. Time with our children is limited and time with our spouse will end someday. As we reflect back on our careers, we will find that the most satisfying accomplishments occur with simplicity.

Consider the example of Henry David Thoreau who, in 1845, voluntarily abandoned the material comforts of a noble's life in Boston and his circle of friends at Harvard for the simpler, significant life in the woods around Walden Pond. He wrote "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived . . . For our life is frittered away by detail. We must simplify, simplify."

It is not the valuables that we accumulate or the treasures we have. It is what we have given away to others that will make a difference and leave a legacy of ourselves. It is in this way that we redefine the meaning of success as significance. It is then that we can answer the question, "Are you leading your life or is your life leading you?" As leaders at home and at work, we are in the limelight and must be aware that our family, residents, hospital staff, and coworkers are taking their cues from us. As role models, we have a profound opportunity and responsibility to influence our family and the next generation of surgeons and healthcare professionals in a very positive way if we are an effective leader.

Leadership is a necessary part of every team, company, club, organization, military unit, family, or surgical service. Simply put, a leader is a person who achieves goals through the inspiration and motivation of other people. A leader challenges and energizes people to do what they don't want to do so that they can achieve what they all want to achieve. Leadership is nothing more than a skill that can be learned, refined, and passed on to others by example. There are several characteristics of outstanding leaders which I hope to describe and illustrate for you in the next several minutes.

The first characteristic is vision and this vision has nothing to do with eyesight. Vision is the ability to see farther than the eye can see and often the ability to see what isn't there. Only by seeing what is not there can you bring something new, creative and exciting into existence. George Bush, Sr. learned the importance of vision, but he learned it the hard way. President Bush had many accomplishments during his presidency and the dramatic victory in Iraq earned him a whopping 85% approval rating in March of 1991. Bush's re-election seemed to be a foregone conclusion for many, but we all know what happened on the second Tuesday in November of 1992. America rejected President Bush and chose Bill Clinton. The voters perceived that President Bush had no vision for domestic policy and had settled for the role of caretaker rather than that of visionary. Unfortunately, Mr. Bush forgot the advice of former President Ronald Reagan who said "to grasp and hold a vision is the very essence of leadership" [2].

True visionaries often standout, in that, their minds are not focused in the here and now but in the there and then. Their vision is more real to them than the solid reality around them. Most people are focused on the everyday practical mundane reality. They believe in what they can see. Visionaries see what is not there and change the world by living in the present and focusing intently on the future. Visionary leaders are always optimistic; they put problems in a hopeful and positive framework. They call people to expect more of their world and venture out with risk-taking courage to push themselves beyond what they feel they are capable of achieving. But as we work harder and longer in the new economy, the time, energy, and motivation to develop our personal vision is threatened.

In 1965, Fred Smith was a student at Yale. He came up with an innovative airfreight company concept and selected this subject as his term paper in his economics class. His professor read the paper, and promptly gave him a "C" stating that, while the concept was interesting, the idea was not feasible. After graduation, he joined the Marines and went to Vietnam. He became a platoon leader, and later a pilot of over 200 ground support missions, winning the bronze and silver stars. After the war, Mr. Smith inherited $4 million when his father died. He invested it in his company and raised an additional $72 million in loans and investments. The company suffered heavy losses during the first few years, and it took until 1975 to become profitable. His vision of a successful overnight express company, however, seized the imaginations of his employees, and today Federal Express operates in 210 countries, employs 140,000 people, delivers 3 million packages per day and is valued at $7 billion. It all happened because of a visionary leader who saw what wasn't there and made it a reality [2].

A vision should be clear, simple, visual, focused on change and demanding sacrifice. It should be personal, communicated with contagious optimism and be personified by the leader. A vision should be a broad vista and not necessarily a detailed plan. Plans tend to be rigid and confining. Finally, the vision should be difficult, or even seemingly impossible to achieve.

It was President John F. Kennedy who, in a speech to the nation on May 25, 1961 said, "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project will be more impressive to mankind or more important for the long range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish." Many people who heard these words in 1961 had thought President Kennedy had lost his mind. But on July 20, 1969, at 10:56 PM eastern standard time, astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped out of the lunar module of Apollo 11 and made the first human footprints on the moon. He fulfilled the vision of President Kennedy [3].

Our natural human tendency is to dwell on past glories rather than focus on future possibilities. Nostalgia comes much easier to us than foresight, but a clear vision provides a sense of direction and a stimulus for growth. The vision clarifies decision-making and keeps us focused. Good decisions are defined as those that move us closer to seeing our vision become reality.

Communication is another central element of leadership and it is also a learned skill. A leader's most powerful tools are words. I can't think of a single leader, who is not also a great speaker and a dynamic communicator. In America during World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt kept America inspired through his stirring speeches and fireside chats. John Kennedy provided powerful words, as he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." President Ronald Reagan went to Berlin in 1987 and delivered a powerful speech with a seemingly impossible demand: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Two years later, the Wall came down.

Leadership is all about being out in front of people, and leading by example. Leaders inspire people to share in their vision through their ability to communicate. Winston Churchill put it this way: "Of all the talents bestowed upon us, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world." [4]. While the number one fear of most people is still public speaking, many people overcome this fear and take the time to develop solid public speaking skills. As a leader, your most powerful leadership tools are not your capable staff, your computer, cell phone, or fax machine; your most powerful tools are your words. Take the opportunity to verbalize your vision seriously and rehearse your speeches often.

Some leadership experts will tell you that a wise leader should keep a margin of detachment between themselves and their subordinates. But too many leaders in business, surgery, or other occupations take themselves too seriously. They demand respect and some even wish to be feared by their subordinates. They foolishly maintain a stiff dignity that communicates callus and creates resentment and distrust. A wise leader is not afraid to sacrifice some dignity in order to make a personal connection and communicate with the people on his or her team. It is these personal relationships and connections that have true and lasting value [5].

The old leadership model is a pyramid with the leader at the top, but innovative leaders in the 21st century have learned to lead from the middle. Communicate everything you possibly can to your partners in all directions, because when people feel informed, they feel important and included. The ivory tower mentality tells us to hoard information and this thinking results in morale deterioration and people feel that they are not trusted. Your team is left to speculate, and speculation is a powerful divisive force in any organization. Share information and take your team into your confidence, and they will have confidence in you. Actively solicit ideas and suggestions from all parts of the organization and listen [2].

Our tendency as leaders is to generate an idea, call a meeting, communicate the idea, and send out the troops to

implement it. The problem with that approach is that it's our idea not there's. The more ownership people have in the project, the higher their level of motivation. Listen to all sides of the issue before you make a decision. On average, people hear only about 50% of what is said to them. They only pay attention to about 25% of what is said. They only understand 12%, only believe 6%, and only remember 3%. Anyone can do better than 3%. Few people have had such training in listening. Living in our contemporary competitive culture, most of us spend most of our time getting our own views across. We tend to find other people's speeches a tedious interruption of our own ideas.

There is an attitude, particularly prevalent in surgery, developed probably in our training, which often blocks the next key leadership ability of delegation. We often seek to prove that we can do it all. In our minds, true leaders were people who could do it all. The fear of failure often drives us to 12- to 18-hour days, 6 or 7 days a week, leaving no time for social life or family contact. At some point, it dawns on us that our job becomes too big for any one person. It is then, that we realize that effective leaders know that they can't do it all themselves. Their success and the success of their organization depend upon other people. The leader who cannot delegate simply cannot lead.

Delegation first means demonstration; we tell our team—I'll work, you watch. As we involve them in the process, it leads to I'll work, and you help. As we shift more responsibility to others, it becomes you work, and I'll help. And finally, when we have entrusted the work completely to others, we remark you work, and I'll watch. Strong leaders do their work through other people, rather than doing it all themselves [2]. In the process, their work is multiplied many times over by the people around them. In this way, effective leaders surround themselves with the best people they can find. They train them, trust them, and then get out of their way. These people then develop a stake in the success of the organization and are not willing to settle for simply a paycheck at the end of the week or month. They become self starters and flexible, adaptable people who can accept responsibility, solve problems and admit mistakes. In return, leaders who delegate effectively and avoid the trap of micromanagement have more time and energy to focus on visionary thinking.

They're usually four reasons why it's hard to delegate tasks and responsibilities to others, especially as a surgeon. One is insecurity. We often are fearful that other people can do our job as well or better than we can. We will be replaced. Quite the opposite is true. When we learn that there's no need to feel threatened when others are successful, their success becomes our success. Perfectionism is another aspect that prevents us from delegating appropriately. We want the task done just right and there's simply no one else that would do it is well as we can. We need to give the members of our team opportunities to be successful and put aside unattainable standards for them to meet. The third reason is false pride. We don't feel that we need anyone else and this is the surgeon's Achilles' heel. A truly strong leader has a sense of humility and depends on the strength, resources, and ingenuity of others. President Ronald Reagan kept his favorite inspirational quotation displayed on his desk in the Oval Office and it said, "There's no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit." Respected leaders take a little more than their share of the blame and a little less of their share of the credit. The final reason is lack of trust. If we can't trust people enough to delegate tasks and responsibilities to them, then they haven't failed, we have [2].

While expectations need to be met, we need to give people room to make mistakes. Tom Watson, the founder of IBM understood the importance of allowing for mistakes and failures. When one of his executives spent $12 million on a project that failed miserably, the young executive walked into Watson's office and offered his resignation. "I don't want your resignation," Watson replied. "I just invested $12 million in your education. I can't afford to lose you now—get back to work." When people get their faces in the dust, great leaders, pick them up, dust them off, and get them back into the game.

Great leaders understand that failure is the doorway to success. A successful leader is someone who has learned through failure and allows others to learn some of those wonderful lessons of failure as well. As mentors and role models, we learn from our mistakes to avoid a truly catastrophic failure and communicate these qualities to those around us. And during this time of failure, leadership becomes the art of taking negatives and transforming them into positives. Taking problems and turning them into opportunities. Taking failures and transforming them into successes. Leadership is the art of facing up to mistakes, learning from them, and making sure those mistakes are never repeated. My son Aaron keeps this quote of Michael Jordan on his dresser; "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career; I've lost almost 300 games; 26 times I've been trusted to make the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed."

Failure can lead to crisis and effective leaders transform crisis into opportunity. Crisis and conflict are teaching opportunities and tools for generating positive change and building stronger relationships. There's no question that, as a leader, you still have to settle disputes and deal with human pride and vanity on a daily basis. But effective communication and listening will allow you to convert conflict into opportunity. Conflict is destructive only if it is avoided, denied or mismanaged. In fact, an element of conflict in every discussion is good. It shows that people are involved and it forces us, as leaders, to listen. Pat Williams, author of *The Paradox of Power*, said it best; "Your toughest crises are your best opportunities." [2].

But whatever you do, keep your cool. Once your temper flares, progress is over. Distrust your own initial reaction, because it is probably defensive, not objective or constructive. Focus on areas of agreement first to resolve conflict. Once we really get to the issues, there may be more agree-

ment then was once thought. As all the emotion is cleared out of the way, you'll find there is much more common ground than you may have realized. Great leaders manage their temper well, stay cool in crisis, and make quality decisions under pressure.

In closing, we live in exciting times and we have the power to arrange the new economy to suit our needs. We can determine the shape of our future and redefine success by the decisions and choices we make. The legacy that we leave, our significance, is reflected in the richness of our relationships, the sturdiness of our families, and the character of our communities. As paid work demands more of our time, visionary thinking helps us refocus our priorities and achieve a better balance in our lives. As effective leaders, we communicate our vision to others and learn to listen. We lead from the middle and recognize and inspire the vast number of talented people around us. And finally, we empower others through deliberate delegation and calmly transform failure, conflict and crisis into opportunity. As we leave Niagara, this magnificent landmark of North America, let us all commit to redefining our success as significance and use these tools to become a strong and effective leader in this time of the new economy.

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