

Treasuring Memories of Mentors



Ms. Weiss is a Santa Monica, CA-based health care consultant and speaker.

On the very first day of my work in health care, more than 30 years ago, Samuel Tibbitts, the late CEO of the Lutheran Hospital Society, called me into his office.

"What are you doing for us?" asked the leader of what was then a large southern California health system.* "I'm working in public relations," I said. "No," he replied. "When people ask what you do for a living, you need to answer, 'I'm a health care executive specializing in public relations.'"

Sam's next question to me was, "Do you have automobile insurance?" When I said yes, he advised me to "purchase career insurance" as well. He suggested that each week I place a few dollars into a "career" account at the bank and use those funds to attend professional development programs attended by other executives. Although the organization was willing to cover the costs of educational programs in my area of interest, Sam said, he encouraged me to also participate in executive conferences at my own expense.

He was one wonderful first career mentor. Today a leadership icon, Sam Tibbitts is largely credited with developing one of the nation's first integrated delivery systems with the creation of a health plan known as PacifiCare—which has become not only one of the nation's largest insurers but also one of its biggest Medicare HMOs.

Sam continued to be my mentor throughout my tenure at Lutheran Hospital Society. He provided me with a list of publications I should subscribe to, most of which were targeted to executives not only in our industry but in other industries as well. He also offered another suggestion, one that was unusual for the early 1970s. He told

me to try to be on a first-name basis with board members and physicians.

"Coupled with your 'career insurance,' increasing knowledge of the industry, and visibility at executive gatherings, getting to know such people will do wonders for your future," he said.

I found my notes on Sam's advice recently in the box in which I keep my treasured photos of loved ones; notes of advice that I've written down in shorthand over the years; and selected letters and e-mails from mentors, friends, students, and attendees at conferences and classes I've addressed. When the next earthquakes hit my California community, this box will be the possession I grab for first.

I'm grateful to Sam and the many other mentors who have taken the time to guide me over the years. They gave me advice that has helped in a career that has taken me to 49 states and to foreign countries, speaking, consulting, teaching university students, and authoring articles.

SOME UNFORGETTABLE MENTORS

Kaye Daniels, RN, a past chairperson of the National Association for Home Care, taught me to "stay ahead of the curve" and be an innovative leader. She was one of the first in her field to build a network of hospitals that collaborated to offer home health services; she was also an international innovator in hospice care.

In the early 1970s, Kaye asked me to help create a marketing plan for a home health agency, one of the first marketing efforts ever for a health care provider. Doing so launched my own marketing career and taught me the importance of entrepreneurial and transformational leadership.

James Block, MD, a former CEO of University Hospitals of Cleveland and Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, understands the importance of encouraging, mentoring, and tapping women and people of color for executive positions and board slots. Jim implores others to identify non-tradi-

*In 1988, the Lutheran Hospital Society merged with another organization to form Unihealth. In 1996, Unihealth's health care facilities became part of Catholic Healthcare West, San Francisco.

Communication Strategies

BY RHODA WEISS

tional leaders, thereby helping them reach their aspirations and realize their dreams, in the process becoming a model for others. My success as a consultant and speaker in business development is largely due to Jim's encouraging me to never give up on my dream and to stretch beyond my limits,

A leader is responsible for listening to constituents and shaping the future in the best interest of all those served.

constantly exploring new areas in which I might acquire expertise.

Starting early in my career, **Sr. Marie Madeleine Shonka, SCL**, president of St. John's Health Center, Santa Monica, CA, has provided me with a wealth of advice. She taught

me to view those we serve not simply as patients with, for example, broken hips, damaged hearts, cancerous tumors, or terminal diseases, but rather as human beings to which we are connected in many subtle ways, including our attitudes and emotions. Sr. Marie was ever mindful of a caregiver's role as a healer of the spirit as well as the body.

James Walker is the CEO of a Glen Burnie, MD, facility that he recently led through a name change. Formerly North Arundel Hospital, Jim's organization is now Baltimore Washington Medical Center. Jim is the epitome of kindness and caring toward every employee, no matter what their position or stature. From him, I've learned that trust and mutually beneficial relationships are crucial to success and change. Throughout the facility's name change, he

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demonstrated that a leader is responsible for listening to constituents and shaping the future in the best interest of all those served. Jim accomplished this through inspiring words and deeds.

Sr. Beatrice Tom, OSF, CEO of St. Francis Health-care System of Hawaii, Honolulu, has been a mentor and spiritual adviser to me in my role as an associate of the Sisters of St. Francis. For Sr. Bea, as she is known, our healing work is always

about fulfilling the needs of the community and of the poor. "Beyond the concrete and steel frame-

work of the hospital is the fragile, human thread of life connected to us not only through medical and physical needs but through psychological, social, and spiritual needs as well," she says. It is our role, Sr. Bea believes, to continually identify unmet needs and find the means to ensure they are met.

Tom Collins, EdD, the retired CEO of MemorialCare, a Long Beach, CA, health care system, was a great mentor because he emphasized opportunities rather than problems and demonstrated a dogged persistence in reaching strategic aims. Tom stood as a model of the passion and enthusiasm needed to help an organization achieve its goals, at the same time insisting on high-quality clinical care, no matter what competitors might be doing. He taught me that leaders must be accepted in the hearts and minds of all stakeholders and have the conviction and tenacity to make change happen.

Rose Ann Poyzer, RN, recently retired as vice president, home care and hospice, Health-care Association of Hawaii, Honolulu. The most active person I've ever met (she is now in her 80s), Rose Ann constantly promotes networking and community connections. She knows that health care organizations cannot be successful unless they have the knowledge, community support, and advocacy necessary to provide the best possible care for their patients. Her inspiration has been important to the work that I and others have done as members of community, statewide, and national boards.

Chris Van Gorder, CEO of Scripps Health in San Diego County, CA, came to hospital administration after an injury he sustained as a police officer left him hospitalized for many months. That experience taught Chris that leaders provide inspiration and listen intently to all viewpoints. He understands the importance of energizing others; of making lifelong leadership learning a goal for everyone in the organization; and of recognizing and rewarding employees, physicians, and volunteers on a day-to-day basis, rather than once a year.

Gail Larson (with her husband and sons) has taught me that leaders need balance in their work and personal lives; and that family, friends, and health are paramount to our existence. The CEO of Providence Health System-Everett, WA, Gail is a seasoned administrator who knows that clear, consistent, transparent communications and uncompromising integrity concerning all stake-

holders is critical to leadership. She consistently reminds me that, as leaders, we must embody our organizations' mission, vision, values, and beliefs.

I am currently enrolled in the PhD Program in Leadership and Change at Antioch University, Los Angeles, and my professors there have taught me the importance of being a "reflective leader," a scholar and researcher who values both theory and practice. I've learned that a reflective leader thinks deeply about his or her own work in a context of inclusive, ethical decision making and scholarly fields of study. A reflective scholar thinks deeply about the intellectual content of his or her subject and seeks to achieve mastery of relevant fields of knowledge while, at the same time, engaging others in dialogue and public forums. A reflective researcher explores knowledge in his or her field of expertise and thinks critically about the methods of inquiry involved in that field.

I'm grateful to these mentors, all of whom are reflective leaders.

A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE

Now that I've mentioned certain mentors and some advice they've given me, let me share a few of my own thoughts on leadership, many of which I've adapted and expanded upon after receiving them from mentors.

Make People Feel Welcome Create a sense of belonging among all members of your health care team—employees, physicians, volunteers, vendors, and board members. A physician once told me that the main reason doctors leave a hospital to practice elsewhere is because they didn't feel welcome at the hospital.

Every new member of your health care team should receive a personal call or note welcoming them to the organization. Executives should attend every orientation, no matter how brief the appearance. They should encourage managers to place new team members on committees, task forces, and other groups, thereby giving the newcomers an opportunity to share their knowledge, expertise, and gifts. Managers and executives should leave their desks frequently to meet and greet team members on all shifts; they should make a point of eating meals in the cafeteria, sitting with people they don't know. Jim Walker's success in changing his hospital's name had much to do with the fact that he knows every employee, physician, and volunteer in his hospital; they know

him and hold him in great respect.

Pay Attention to Detail Sweat the small stuff. Most leadership books try to discourage executives from worrying too much about details. In health care, however, it's inattention to those details that can cause confusion and mistakes and can make the difference between success and failure. Although leaders may not need to worry about details themselves, it's their job to ensure that *someone* is focusing on them.

Take Care Be afraid of making too many mistakes. My father, who at 88 remains the "king of common sense," often takes a look at the textbooks and articles that I'm reading on leadership and change. He has never been able to understand the concept of "encouraging mistakes." "What would happen," he asks, "if doctors were taught that it's okay to make mistakes?" Again, we need not always listen to what leadership gurus have to say. Your parents, like mine, were often right.

Be Friendly and Approachable *Always* talk to strangers (assuming, of course, that you're an adult and conversation is appropriate). That advice comes from my 80-year-old mother. She says that you never know who you'll meet sitting on an airplane, lifting weights in the gym, standing in line at the grocery store, or debating an issue at the city council. Yes, Mom is right. I've learned some great life lessons and management theories and have heard both heart-breaking stories and eminently practical advice (including how to get rid of mold)—just by speaking to strangers.

My own advice is: Never sit next to anyone you know at a meeting, gathering, or social event. We can learn something from everyone we meet, and doing so will make one both a better leader and, of course, a better person.

Keep Learning Invest in lifelong learning for both yourself and your employees. To prepare managers and supervisors for executive positions, create in-house leadership institutes and academies. Establish professional development programs for all staff members, regardless of their position in the organization.

Development programs can range from collaborating with public schools to helping employees

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complete their high school equivalency certificates to partnering with colleges and universities to help employees attain associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees. I grew up in a Detroit community from which no more than a handful of high school students went on to college. Where would I be without mentors and family members encouraging me to pursue a PhD?

Follow Dreams, but Be Practical Learn to turn the vision of visionaries into the realities of realists. Although all of us in health care dream for a better future for those we serve ("don't give up on your dreams or you'll wake up cranky"), our dreams must be balanced with what is possible and sustainable.

Don't Fear Change Good leaders lead "from the heart," rallying their followers to move toward a better future and encouraging experimentation

and change. Dynamic environments, like those involving contemporary health care, call for leaders with passion and charisma that excites and engages all members of the organization.

Concerning leadership, my favorite quote is from Horace Mann (1796-1859), Antioch University's first president and the first great American advocate of public education. When the university opened in 1836, Mann gave an inaugural address. He told his audience, "Be afraid to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

What have you done lately for the humanity of your organization, your community, and society at large? ■

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