

ATS

FELLOWS CORNER



DEVELOPING THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO ADVANCE YOUR CAREER & IMPROVE YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT

ATS members discuss the characteristics possessed by effective leaders, the challenges faced by clinicians and researchers who hold leadership positions, and tips for effectively negotiating, delegating and building consensus. The ATS will also be addressing these issues during PG14 and PG28, two postgraduate courses that the Education Committee will be sponsoring at the ATS 2012 International Conference in San Francisco. The two-part workshop, which was first held at ATS 2011 in Denver, was extremely popular with attendees at various points in their careers.

Q. What are the characteristics or qualities of an effective team?

A. Teams function best when all members have clear roles and there is open communication, said Patricia Kritek, MD, EdM, associate professor in the University of Washington's Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine. "Every team member has to have a voice and a role for there to be effective function. Leadership is essential and the style of leadership will be central to whether a team is effective."

Marc Moss, M.D., the Roger S. Mitchell Professor of Medicine at the University of Colorado-Denver School of Medicine, noted that there are many qualities that contribute to an effective team, and offered some examples.

"Everyone must understand their role and the roles of the other team members; everyone on the team must bring unique skills that are necessary for the team to work; and everyone on the team must be valued and committed to the success of the team," he noted. "In addition, effective teams have members who bring different perspectives and feel comfortable communicating their opinions."

Q. What characteristics make an effective team leader?

A. "Effective team leaders must put the success of the entire team ahead of their personal gains, be good listeners, inspirational, visionary, and able to make difficult decisions when necessary," Dr. Moss said.

Dr. Kritek added that different types of skills might be valued differently, based

on the type of team and the team's function and goals. "Communication skills are essential—both communicating a clear plan, as well as listening," she said. "A team leader needs to have a vision and be confident in moving that plan forward. Being organized and structured also helps, and a good team leader generally is insightful and self-aware."

It is also important to place team members in positions where they can have individual success, while at the same time helping the overall team to accomplish its goals, noted Alexander Benson, MD, instructor at the University of Colorado, who attended the Society's inaugural postgraduate course on leadership skills at the 2011 ATS International Conference in Denver. "Individual and team goals need to be somewhat in alignment, but will inevitably differ," he explained. "A leader must understand each team member's personal goals, learning style, unique talents and deficiencies. The ATS leadership workshop teaches strategies that team leaders can use to position and transition team members to roles where they can help the team and have personal success."

Q. What are the top three challenges a clinician will face as he/she moves into leadership position?

A. "I think for many of us, learning how to delegate and how to manage one's time are some of the greatest challenges," noted Dr. Kritek. "As you reach higher levels of leadership, you need to build a team you trust to accomplish 'bigger-picture' goals."

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It's also essential to understand that skillsets built—and relied upon—in earlier positions may not be as useful when moving into a leadership position, Dr. Moss said.

“The skills that were useful to be an excellent intern, resident, fellow or junior attending are not always the same skills that are necessary in leadership positions,” he said. “The job description changes and, therefore, some of the things that were effective in the past will not work moving forward.”

This kind of transition requires trusting others to make decisions, as well as recognizing and respecting that people accomplish tasks in different ways, added Dr. Benson.

Q. How important is it to learn time-management skills, and how do those skills come into play in managing a team?

A. Time management skills are important in any job description, according to Dr. Moss, and understanding how to be productive and efficient can improve both job performance and satisfaction.

Dr. Kritek agrees. “Time-management is essential,” she said. “It is amazing how much of the day can slip away and how much of it can be eaten up by e-mail. With multiple balls in the air all the time, to be effective in moving all your projects forward, you need to budget/plan your time.”

Time management is also critical in ensuring a balance when the workday ends, she added. “Being happy relies on enjoying your life both at work and outside of work,” she said. “Without a focus on time management, many of us start to minimize the time outside of work and cut out some of the most important activities that make us happy.”

Prioritizing what needs to be accomplished first is also important.

“Your ability as a leader to accomplish multiple tasks, all of which are ‘very important’ to different individuals will determine how you are viewed as a leader by the members of your team,” said Dr. Benson. “Therefore, strategies that help you prioritize timing and importance of various tasks, simplify your daily work list by ‘cutting the fat’ and improving efficiency will solidify your reputation as an effective leader and set the tone for the entire team. These skills also inevitably lead to an improved quality of life, as I can attest having utilized some of these strategies in my own life over the past year.”

Q. Managing coworkers must be challenging. What are some keys to effective negotiation and consensus-building, and how can one learn to delegate responsibility effectively?

A. Both Dr. Moss and Dr. Kritek point to communication as being a critical element in negotiating and building consensus among team members.

“I think making sure everyone’s voice is heard and that each person has a ‘seat at the table’ is essential when it comes to negotiation,” Dr. Kritek noted. “Listening is key, but at times there is also need for decision-making, and once a decision is made, it is important to have a plan for assessing the decision and getting the input of all parties with regard to the success or failure of an initiative.”

If you’ve structured your team around good communication skills, delegating responsibility is also a much simpler task, Dr. Moss added. “If everyone understands their role on the team and the role of the other team members, then who does what is second nature,” he said.

If feasible, it may be beneficial to establish a general mission statement for an academic division, research or clinical care group, Dr. Benson added. Once this mission statement is explicitly written, issues regarding negotiation and consensus-building can always be referred back to which solution best accomplishes the mission of the group. “In patient care,

the mission generally focuses on what is best for the patient,” he explained. “The process of writing a team mission statement fosters a team concept and helps individuals determine whether their personal goals align with the team goals.”

Q. How can a clinician effectively and tactfully address gender and cultural issues, as well as age differences that occur when young staff and older, more experienced staff need to interact?

A. Understanding gender, cultural and age differences is essential to building an effective team, and requires education and awareness, Dr. Moss said.

“On the surface, simple issues of what defines gender and ethnicity are really not that simple,” he said. “Understanding what is important to your co-workers will build an effective workplace for everyone.”

Q. What are some effective tactics in dealing with difficult individuals, both within the team and among other staff, including administrators? Do you have any advice for managing egos?

A. According to Dr. Moss, the first step in dealing with difficult people lies in developing an understanding of the person, as well as underlying motivations. “There are certain types of ‘difficult people,’” he said. “Identifying what type of difficult person you are dealing with is usually the first issue. Once you understand the person, there are effective ways to address the problems that are resulting from his or her behavior.”

In many situations, Dr. Kritek favors addressing these kinds of issues directly.

“Sometimes, we are frustrated but don’t actually confront problems or the individual causing them head-on,” she said. “This is not always the right approach. We can be annoyed or irritated without actually taking the time and energy—and it takes both of these—to sit down and talk to the challenging individual directly. Often, asking the person about the specific issues or problems is the best way to come to a successful resolution.”

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Q. Can it be helpful for young leaders to seek out and rely on the advice of mentors further along in their careers?

A. Mentors, in all shapes and sizes, are great for this, said Dr. Kritek. “I think the process of ‘growing up’ in your professional life means sampling techniques from a variety of mentors and role models and seeing what works for you.”

Dr. Moss agrees. “No matter how old or senior you are, everyone needs mentoring,” he said.

Q. Where can I learn more about how to develop the skills to advance my career?

A. Register for the ATS 2012 International Conference in San Francisco and sign up for PG14 and/or PG28, which will take place in San Francisco’s Moscone Center on Friday, May 18, and Saturday, May 19. In addition to discussing issues like team-building and time-management, the two programs will teach attendees how to use interdisciplinary communication and teamwork to solve problems and accelerate progress.

“These competencies apply to almost all jobs, but are often assumed to be present although only rarely taught,” said Dr. Moss. “At our postgraduate course, attendees will learn about and then practice the skills needed to transition from a ‘first job’ to a leadership position in practice, industry or academics. The course will help improve time management skills, productivity and, ultimately, job satisfaction.”

As someone who has benefited from attending last year’s program, Dr. Benson calls the workshop “the single best postgraduate course I have ever taken.”

“The mental exercises we performed helped me to take the next step in my personal and professional growth,” he said. “In the last year, I have utilized some of the leadership strategies in many different environments, including running a multidisciplinary ICU team, coaching youth sports and managing a house full of kids. This course adds more than a few useful tools to your belt.” ■