Editorial

The Curse of Intentional Mediocrity: Why Leadership Matters?

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Many technical professions, such as those in healthcare, involve formal rigorous education that teaches both a code of ethics and a variety of technical skills. With a foundation in ethics and in technical competence, professional graduates embark on a career in which they serve society as healers. Society's members, as much because they need to as they want to, trust professionals to always put the needs of the members first. Yet, many professionals do not follow the code of ethics and many professionals do not follow the technical protocols they were taught to ensure the highest standards of care. Compromises are often made, leading to poor-quality work.

An area of focus that is often lacking in the educational curricula of healing professions is leadership. The focus on technical skills, whether manual or diagnostic, often takes precedence, leaving little to no time for leadership education in academic curricula. The outcome is that graduates are poorly equipped to be effective leaders. While some recognize their leadership gaps and seek education, often through mentorship, many overlook the blend of science and art that effective leadership demands. As a result, their teams rarely reach their full potential, leading to compromised patient care and diminished team fulfillment.[1]

THE CHALLENGE OF MEDIOCRE LEADERSHIP

There are approximately 250,000 students enrolled in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes at any one time across the world.[2] Many of these MBA students will not lead in the way they were taught; to be effective and bring maximum success. Because this situation is common, and because there are many successful leaders who did not matriculate with an MBA or receive formal training, the worth of an MBA is rightly questioned. Three common reasons cited in the Harvard Business Review for pursuing an MBA degree are that it improves career trajectory, enhances earning potential, and provides connections.[3] Unfortunately, the author did not include having a positive impact and/or making the world a better place as reasons to pursue an MBA degree. This underscores that leadership education alone does not solve leadership problems. In fact, just as healthcare

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professionals do not follow their code of ethics and do not follow the technical protocols they were taught, so do many leaders fail to practice what they were taught resulting in mediocrity.

What does mediocrity look and feel like? Merriam Webster defines the term as "average to below average quality." Synonyms for the word are passable, indifferent, and ordinary. What does it mean to lead with intentional mediocrity? It could simply mean doing the same as has always been done because it's easier. In other ways it could mean a lack of initiative; selfishness; lack of passion; or a lack of a shared mission. Many times, a mediocre leader is one who has an incentive to lead (i.e. power driven; career concerns) versus the ability to lead (i.e. vision, charisma, confidence).

Mediocrity in leadership does not go unnoticed. A 2007 study published in the Journal of Leadership Studies revealed a mean percentage of "good" leaders was only 24.2%, while "average" and "bad" leaders mean percentage scores were 37.6% and 37.4% respectively. Thirteen different categories were listed as reasons why survey respondents classified their leaders as a bad leader, with the most frequently cited reasons being that they were unable to deal effectively with subordinates, had poor ethics or a lack of integrity, and poor personal behavior.[4]

Here are three examples of intentional mediocrity (all are based on real situations):

1. A hospital that has a mission to serve the vulnerable and the poor does not have enough money to pay its employees a decent wage and is losing critical employees as a result. Some of the consequences for the remaining employees are falling morale, working long hours, and burnout. Some of the consequences for patients are longer wait times, interacting with stressed and burned out employees, and more mistakes being made in their care. Despite this dire situation, the hospital leadership announces plans to invest money in a new museum to chart the history of the hospital. Employees are devastated and feel that hospital leadership is further abandoning them when they are giving their all to the hospital. Employees feel betrayed, more employees leave and the cycle continues.

2. A university has a Contracting department that is underfunded. Contracts with vendors who supply mission critical equipment and supplies often take 9-12 months to be reviewed, revised and approved. It takes so long that the process often has to be started again because quotes from vendors that are valid for 6 months need to be requested again. Despite this challenge, the employees of the university work hard to meet the mission of education. University leadership announces that the senior university administrators, who are already paid the most, will all receive end-of-year bonuses for the positive outcomes achieved by the employees of the university.

3. A dental practice has a new dentist leader who has hired a new employee who comes to work late, gossips about the other employees, but who works hard. The new dentist leader has talked with the new employee on numerous occasions but there has been no change in the behaviour over a 4-week period of time. The new dentist refuses to hold the new employee accountable to being a team player because she does not want to lose the productivity of the employee. As a result, the other employees feel like the supportive work environment that has been carefully built over years where everyone works together is being quickly eroded. The team-oriented employees believe that being a good person is meaningless to the new dentist leader. The fun work atmosphere evaporates and cliques develop that undermine patient care. Long-term loyal employees consider

leaving the practice and looking for another job.

These are three examples that showcase how mediocrity starts at the top with the leader and leadership decisions. Can you relate to any of these examples? Have you experienced anything similar? We now turn to how you, as a leader, can think differently to avoid these types of examples. How can you prevent and/or overcome mediocrity?

YOUR PATH TO GREAT LEADERSHIP IS PREVENTING AND OVERCOMING MEDIOCRITY

"Every single day, in every walk of life, ordinary people do extraordinary things."

Jim Valvano

Leadership matters because it is the only capability that can systematically bring out the best in people so that they can achieve more together than they can alone. Leadership, when focused on a noble mission, represents the best efforts of humanity; specifically, to coalesce efforts of well-meaning people to make our world a better place. Whereas in some industries it is difficult to perceive a noble mission beyond superficial aspirations, in health care we are fortunate to have chosen one of the most noble missions. In health care, we serve humanity by preventing disease and by healing the diseased. Another field of work that is truly noble is education. Whether for school children, college students or adult learners, the impact of the noble work of teachers as they invest themselves in society's future cannot be overstated. For those of us who educate in health care, then, we are doubly blessed to have an impact with our lives.

Regardless of one's talent and work ethic, impact is extremely limited when working solo. Each of us needs others for our own talent to have its greatest impact. Embracing the concept that one needs others for one's own success means that one must learn to exhibit leadership capabilities that create and perpetuate high-performing teams. Acknowledging that success depends on others requires developing leadership skills that foster high-performing teams.

THE ONLY THING THAT MAKES YOU A LEADER IS THE PRESENCE OF FOLLOWERS.

Often, characteristics of leaders are listed without an understanding that these characteristics mean nothing if no one follows. This raises the question: What motivates someone to follow you as a leader? In our opinion, a critical attribute for a leader who wants followers is to have a servant's heart where every action is focused on the success of the team members. People are drawn to follow a leader who epitomizes selflessness and people recoil from following a leader who displays selfishness.[4-6] However, to focus only on the success of team members is a mistake made by many in leadership roles because it is dangerous to do unless a second critical attribute is also present. For your leadership effect on serving your followers to be relevant, the noble mission of the team must always be at the forefront of every decision. It is imperative that BOTH of these attributes are showcased if you want to lead a high-performing team that makes our world a better place.

Preventing mediocrity is best achieved by hiring the right people. Albeit a generalization, people are motivated either by social incentives like altruism or helping mankind and/or by market incentives like money. One needs to hire the right people based on the mission that you, the leader, have set for the team. If your mission is a social one, then you MUST hire social incentivized people because they will align well with the mission. If you hire market incentivized people for a social mission, the mismatch leads to tension and unhappiness, and vice versa. Clearly establishing your mission, then is critical, and backing it up by

hiring people who align with the mission is also critical. Hiring the right people is not enough, however. You must also hold accountable people who are undermining your team's effort to achieve your mission. Most people want to be part of a successful team and each of us fits a certain environment. But not everyone will fit your environment just as you will not fit every environment.

How do you, as a leader, demonstrate genuine care for your team members? Surprisingly, it is both simple to achieve and often overlooked. The most effective approach is to cultivate an environment through intentional words and actions that foster positive emotions, creating a sense of trust, comfort, and mutual respect. For example, being kind, forgiving, generous, thoughtful, slow to judge, quick to help, trusting, collaboration, loyalty, and togetherness, to name just a few, is imperative. Imagine if you worked in such an environment; you would love to go to work. Indeed, it may not even feel like work because it may feel like fun to be alongside everyone else. In contrast, if your words and actions elicit negative feelings (and remember that humans are affected by negative feelings more deeply than they are by positive feelings) such as fear, stress, anxiety, mistrust, loneliness, selfishness, competitiveness and hatred, no one will want to work with you and those that do work with you will do so because they have to and not because they want to.

For many leaders, displaying the words and actions to be who your team needs you to be seems too much. Therein lies the betrayal – if you hold a leadership role, to act well is not a request; it is an obligation. Don't take a leadership role for money or power or prestige or authority because you will be a terrible leader if any of these are your motive. You are responsible for everything and everybody associated with your noble mission. With that responsibility revealed– take a leadership position only if you are fully committed to serving your team and pursuing your shared mission together. There are no excuses to justify any other reason.

So you want to be a good leader but don't know how to be a good leader. You have some options when it comes to learning more about leadership. As we mentioned before, MBA programmes are one avenue. They are extensive in their breadth and depth of content and they are expensive both in terms of time and money. Alternatively, there are shorter programmes that yield a certificate that may be more practical for a working professional. When judging such programmes, we posit that a curriculum that teaches human-centred leadership is the key. One should look for a program that focuses on how to foster an environment where people work together and for each other, all the while striving for excellence in their outcomes. The best organizations and teams in the world do both. They produce great results and they produce great teams. In contrast, a curriculum that teaches processes such as scheduling or billing or marketing will not teach how to lead people. It will teach the easy stuff related to efficiency and getting more done through systems. Not that good systems are unimportant – they are very important. But they are not the key differentiator in team-building. The only differentiator in team-building is you, the leader, committing to practice leadership ethically and in the ways you were taught. If you do so, you will feel the most amazing sense of accomplishment as you watch your team overcome obstacles and reach heights no one else thought possible. Your team, under your leadership, has the potential to change the world.

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