

Leadership & Professional Development: How to Teach When You Don't Know

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"By learning you will teach, by teaching you will learn."

—Latin proverb

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust hospitalists into uncertain clinical situations where scientific evidence was rapidly changing and expert consensus was not always available. Amidst this, our learners were eager to better understand this new disease and how to properly care for patients. This forced hospitalists, as educators, to face the question: "How do you teach when you don't have the answers?"

Teaching outside a hospitalist's expertise existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to exist. It is a challenge encountered frequently by both junior and senior faculty across all disciplines, yet is rarely discussed.¹ However, great learning can still occur when we teach at the edge of our comfort zones.

ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

You don't need to be an expert to be a great teacher. Although most educators know this, we often fear that disclosing our knowledge limitations exposes our weaknesses. But a successful start to the learning journey begins with establishing trust and confidence with your learners. Remaining authentic in your knowledge base will inspire more credibility than false pretenses of content mastery. Phrases like, "This topic is new for me as well. Here's what I do know and what I don't know" or "What a great question. I wish I had a great answer. Let me get back to you" set a standard for honesty and reduce teaching pressures. In turn, learners will be more comfortable acknowledging their own uncertainties and will be more likely to voice their hesitations or ask questions on rounds.

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ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE THE STUDENT

The field of medicine is steeped in hierarchical structure, where the attending is assumed to have the most knowledge. But this may not always be true, as learners are often more up to date on a subject than the attending. By reexamining traditional hierarchies and instead considering ourselves as part of a learning team, we can promote a more positive educational climate.

When a learner asks a question that you don't have an answer for, the response "Great question. I can tell you what I think, but I'm interested in first hearing your thoughts" reflects that you respect your learners and their skills and experiences. You can also ask them to do a literature review and report back to you and the team the next morning. By inverting the hierarchy, you are teaching humility, adaptability, and shared responsibility, as well as demonstrating the skills of being a lifelong learner.²

TEACH THE SKILLS YOU DO HAVE

As educators, we often hold ourselves to unrealistic expectations of being omniscient knowledge vessels. In times of crisis or uncertainty, teaching about how to learn and where to learn become just as important as what to learn. Invite learners to observe how you navigate ambiguity. For example, I recently interacted with a colleague on an unfamiliar case. She said, "Dr Wang, I don't know much about malaria. Can you share with me what made you consider this diagnosis?" Additionally, admitting to learners when you have made an error not only clarifies their learning, but also role models continuous personal improvement.

By modeling humility by acknowledging our own limits, respecting our learners' knowledge and experiences, and demonstrating how we manage uncertainty, we can enhance the learning environment and inspire our learners.

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