

## Leadership & Professional Development: Relational Leadership—It's Not About You

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*"Lead me, follow me, or get the hell out of my way."*

—George Patton

The concept of leadership is often viewed through the lens of the individual. Terms such as "born leader" are canon in our lexicon, and motivational images are common, frequently paired with a singular majestic animal on a mountain peak, meant to inspire awe in the value of the individual leader. This mindset can be problematically reductive, suggesting that leadership is binary and mutually exclusive: we are either leaders or followers. The terminology can also be pejorative, as few are likely to populate a curriculum vitae with examples of being a great follower.

Leadership can instead be regarded as a role rather than a personality trait or superpower. Many of us inhabit multiple leadership roles in our professional lives. Whether participating on a committee, designing an educational curriculum, overseeing a clinical service line, or supervising learners as ward teaching attending, we function as leaders in the context of our relationships with other members of the numerous cohorts within which we work. As leaders, we must consider our relationships to others in a group as opposed to our intrinsic personalities.<sup>1</sup>

The following pearls can help operationalize relational leadership concepts<sup>2,3</sup>:

**We are not alone.** In any given leadership role, we must understand with whom we work (and often depend upon) and what we need to do to allow others to help us succeed. When entering a leadership role with a new group, it is important to assess the interests and skill sets of the rest of the team by either formal or informal means. Many are used to doing so on the first day of attending on a new ward service, but this concept also applies to other roles, such as chairing a new committee.

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**Work with individuals and groups whose knowledge, experience, skills, and/or attitudes are complementary to our own.** This is not as easy as it sounds; when hiring individuals or assembling groups, we tend to gravitate to those like ourselves. Seeking different opinions and styles can be valuable, and promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity is paramount. To do so, we must make efforts to understand our own personal strengths and limitations, ideally supplemented with observation and feedback from a trusted mentor or coach. Taking an honest look at our preconceptions and assumptions is crucial. Consider how we view other silos with which we interact and the presuppositions we make, such as the "typical" surgeon or emergency department practitioner.

**Recognize and publicly share shortcomings.** Transparency about our limitations allows us to build relationships that are more effective and impactful. A leader who meaningfully reveals a weakness for which they need other group members to contribute specific expertise can allow team members to feel more connected or engaged with that leader or group by shifting from interpreting an ask as "Do this task" to the more empowering "I need your help."

Leadership can be effectively conceptualized as a relational skill, fulfilled by various roles in our professional lives. Collaboration, introspection, and transparency are essential to becoming a successful leader.

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