Leadership by Degrees

I recently had the distinct pleasure and privilege of serving as the graduation visiting professor for the Oral-Maxillofacial Surgery Residency Program of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda. As usual, I learned far more from the residents and faculty than I imparted to them. They are an impressive department and have an outstanding faculty team and unmatched clinical facilities.

After my presentations, I enjoyed personal conversations with several of the residents. One in particular struck a cord. He wondered if I thought more oral-maxillofacial surgeons (OMSs) will go on to obtain additional college degrees beyond the clinical degrees they already possess? He observed that it is becoming more common for other healthcare professionals to seek additional higher education and go on to leadership positions in government and industry. My quick response was that it would be great to see this occur but, on the other hand, worry that dentists commonly enter dental school versus other professions because, in part, they want control of their future including running their own business. Seeking leadership positions in organizations, corporations or elected office runs contrary to a more cottage industry career goal.

I went away from our chat thinking whether there might be a new trend in how younger OMSs see their place in society. I recall how often oral-maxillofacial surgery residents or young practicing OMSs take me aside at meetings and ask what drove me to seek additional degrees or tell me they already plan to attend business or law school. I give them my own rationales for getting more education. With respect to my legal training, it boiled down to a longtime curiosity about the law in general, as well as an interest in politics. When seeking admission to law school I never considered it a means to advancing my career or gaining higher leadership positions (I was already a department chair). I sought out business training leading to an MBA for different reasons. The primary reason in my mind then was to improve my skills in financial analysis (at least at the dental school and hospital department levels). I think improving my understanding of leadership principles and practice was an additional motivation, but not sure that was in my thoughts prior to beginning my MBA program.

So those are the reasons that moved me towards added degrees back when I was younger. However, I understand that these days younger OMSs seek more advanced nonclinical training for other reasons that more commonly reflect a desire to better understand their world and be poised to have a greater impact upon it than might otherwise occur by limiting one’s future growth to clinical education and training.

I have long been aware that many health professionals, particularly physicians and nurses who occupy leadership positions in healthcare organizations or industries, have business or law degrees in addition to their clinical ones. It is not invariably the case, but I believe is becoming more common than in the past. These individuals have a more significant impact on society than ever before as more and more healthcare delivery is controlled by for-profit and not-for-profit corporations. Thus, the thought could be for many young OMSs, why be a piece on the chess board when you can aspire to be a chess player, particularly if you see problems in the healthcare delivery or financing system you feel you can help reduce or eliminate.

In retrospect, I do believe my legal education helped me to view my world in a different manner. I have more focus on due process, precise writing, negotiations, and predicting the outcome of legal disputes, as well as a better understanding of contracts and property law. I think it may have helped me be a better leader, but I have no control group to which to compare myself. Law school also gave me a greater appreciation for American history since so much of our history was shaped by our constitution, laws and court decisions.

On the other hand, I have complete confidence that my business training gave me insights and best practices that made me a better leader than I might otherwise have been. Sure, the financial training helped, but I still have relied on colleagues with much more experience than I to help guide me in financial decision-making in my various leadership positions. That, I expect, is true for other clinicians with MBAs who become chief operating officers, medical directors and chief executive officers, but not chief financial officers.

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1But controlling costs and growing existing and new revenue streams were baked into me in my MBA program.
OMSs were often leaders in their high schools, colleges, and dental schools. We have a bright group of talented individuals in our Residents Organization of the AAOMS filling its various leadership positions. These experiences along the way hopefully wet the appetite for OMSs to seek other leadership positions including those in the healthcare industry, government and academia. Further education leading to business and law degrees is not mandatory to gaining leadership positions, but can open doors and round out one’s fund of knowledge to enable attainment of positions of responsibility that can have a lasting positive impact on our world. Additionally, for individuals such as myself who also love learning simply for the sake of learning, additional formal education can be fulfilling no matter where it may lead you in life.

We as a specialty are among the most respected members of the healthcare community. However, we are underrepresented in the leadership suites of organizations that control our practices and exert power over how we care for our patients and finance our businesses and departments. More of us need to overcome our initial urges to work for only ourselves, thinking by doing that we could be free of control by others or the need to depend upon others outside of our practice to achieve success.

Like our physician and nursing colleagues, having more OMSs in leadership positions across our society will benefit us all. Seeking additional formal education and credentials are valuable ways to achieve that end.

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