

dear residents

Leadership is not a Thing - It's an Experience You Create for Others

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Dear Residents,

One of the joys of working directly with you on service is the reminder that I was once in your shoes. Back in September 1988, I was a tentative, nervous, visibly stressed intern, trying hard not to look as uncertain as I felt. I trailed my resident's every move, scribbling notes as if they were commandments. She was only a couple of years older than me, but in my eyes she was a full-fledged adult, confident, capable, and in complete command of the team. I, on the other hand, felt more like an adolescent who had somehow stumbled into the hospital, in awe of her "grown-upness" and wondering if anyone else noticed that I still did not quite feel like a doctor yet.

Of course, time has a way of reshaping our perspective. I could not imagine then that one day I would lead a team myself, much less direct an entire residency program. Along the way, I found myself turning to books and articles about leadership, many of them sending me in different directions. Some urged me to be authoritative, others affiliative or democratic. [Daniel Goleman](#) suggested that great leaders can move fluidly among styles as the moment requires, while [Ron Carucci](#) reminded me that leadership often lives in the balance between agency and ambivalence.

Leadership, in one form or another, will find each of you. It begins with leading a teaching service as a resident and may one day expand to leading a division, a department, or even an institution. As medicine evolves toward less hierarchical structures and more interdisciplinary, matrixed teams, it is worth asking what leadership really means now.

I recently revisited a book I first read a few years ago, [Nine Lies About Work](#). Two chapters continue to stand out. The first "lie" is that *The Best People Are Well-Rounded*; the second is that *Leadership Is a Thing*. The truths are more surprising: the best people are not well-rounded, but "spiky," with distinctive strengths that set them apart. And leadership is not about your traits so much as how the people around you feel under your influence.

The idea that leadership is a definable, fixed set of traits, competencies, or behavioral standards is challenged by Buckingham and Goodall. Too often we act as though one can list the qualities of a "good leader," put someone through training or assessments to score them on those traits, and then expect predictable leadership to result. The truth, however, is that leadership is idiosyncratic. It manifests differently depending on personality, context, strengths, and values, because no two leaders lead in exactly the same way. What matters more than traits is what followers experience. For them, certainty comes not from uniformity but from clarity.

The best leaders create teams where people are genuinely **enthusiastic** about the mission, clearly **understand** what is expected of them, and feel **connected** to colleagues who share their values. They ensure that individuals have the chance to use their **strengths** every day, know their teammates have their **back**, and can **trust** that excellent work will be recognized. Under these leaders, people carry a strong **confidence** in the future of the organization and are consistently **challenged** in ways that help them learn, stretch, and grow.

The authors of *Nine Lies About Work* call these the **eight emotional outcomes** of great leadership, and they are a truer measure of its presence than any checklist of traits. What is striking is that leaders achieve these outcomes in very different ways, each by leaning into their own distinct “spikes.” At UT Southwestern, [Donald Seldin](#) forged these outcomes through his uncompromising intellectual rigor and soaring standards, while [Daniel Foster](#) nurtured them through his gift for humanistic teaching and moral storytelling. Neither fit a generic model of leadership, yet each left an indelible mark because their spikes were vivid, authentic, and impossible to miss.

For you, leadership will not mean copying someone else’s style or fitting a mold. It will mean discovering what is most distinct in you (your own spike) and by leaning into it in ways that make those around you feel clarity, trust, and inspiration. Leadership is not a thing you acquire; it is an experience you create for others.

Wishing you a wonderful week,

Dino Kazi