Donna K. Sollenberger tells a story about Leading Self

Ms. Sollenberger served as Division Administrator for MD Anderson's Division of Surgery and Anesthesiology (1991 – 1993) and as VP for Hospitals and Clinics (1993 – 1997). She left the institution in 1997 to take on the role of CEO of University of Texas Medical Branch. In an interview conducted in 2013, she talks about how important it is for emerging leaders to stretch their capacities.

To Grow, Step out of Your Comfort Zone

[Y]ou should really be proactive in trying to help your organization, in this case, it was the Department of Surgery, even if you don't feel you know everything you need to know about stepping out and volunteering to take a leadership role…. Be sure to reach out and offer to do things—not wait for people to come to you. I'd been on the job maybe about two months—not very long. I was in a practice plan meeting where all the doctors …talk about the management of the clinics and mostly talk about their compensation structure. There was a discussion that the foundation medical service and research plan, the MSRP, needed to be revised. They needed a volunteer to work with the lawyer on rewriting the MSRP plan. They said, "Who from the administrators wants to volunteer to do it?" I'm sitting there, and I'm watching and nobody is raising their hand. I thought, "Wow." So I thought, "Well, okay, I'll volunteer to do it." So I did. I remember Henry, the lawyer, coming over and saying, "Well, I'm really going to enjoy working with you, and let's schedule a time." I said, "Great." We walk out of the room, and I thought, "What have I done?" Because my question at the time was—to myself—"What's an MSRP plan?" I didn't even know what it was. Then I had to go to my boss and admit I wasn't really sure what they were talking about. So he sat down and told me about it, and he said, "Here's the plan. Read through it. If you have questions—" He was really great. He was easy to admit that maybe you didn't know something and give you some guidance. But we basically rewrote—over about a six- to nine-month period—the practice plan.

Stepping out and volunteering to do things even if they aren't in your comfort zone—is that those are the experiences that actually help you grow, help you get noticed by the organization and, in this particular case, made me invaluable to the organization because to our physicians in particular I knew exactly how they got paid to the detail, all the little nuances. So what happened over the next fifteen years is the physicians, regardless of department, when they had a question about their compensation or how their compensation was calculated and they couldn't find anyone to answer it, they would come to me.

About This Content

This interview clip was taken from an in-depth interview conducted for the Making Cancer History Voices Oral History Project. This ongoing project currently contains almost 400 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

The content is available for all uses.

To explore the full interview go to: http://mdanderson.libguides.com/SollenbergerD

About the speaker:

Donna K. Sollenberger [left MD Anderson in 1997 to serve as EVP and CEO UTMB]
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Served as Division Administrator, Division of Surgery and Anesthesiology [1991 – 1993]
VP, Hospitals and Clinics [1993-1997]

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