



“Accidental” Leadership

Featuring Intermountain Healthcare’s A. Marc Harrison, M.D.



Among the AMGA’s featured peer-to-peer sessions was “Accidental Leadership: Leveraging Personal Perspectives,” by Intermountain Healthcare President and CEO A. Marc Harrison, M.D.

Though exhibiting the kind of public speaking naturalness that can be found in many C-suite executives, Harrison’s approach toward his allotted hour-and-fifteen-minute speaking time was one of the most informal talks involving PowerPoint slides. Throughout the narrative journey of his career and accomplishments, Harrison would regularly stop himself and encourage not only questions, but also discussions that could easily veer off into spaces that would potentially leave other presenters sweating and looking at their watch to make sure they got back on track and finished their prepared remarks. Harrison didn’t have a timetable to his agenda, and as a result, his presentation seemed to just go from point to point of its own volition, but never at the expense of its thematic focus: Harrison’s own unusual path into leadership.

“I actually had no intention graduating from medical school, being

Earlier this year, more than 2,000 physicians and healthcare leaders representing hundreds of medical groups across the country traveled to sunny Phoenix, Arizona, to take part in AMGA’s 2018 Annual Conference, listening to dozens of presentations and paneled discussions about the latest trends, challenges, and best practices affecting not just the industry as a whole, but also the individual doctors and staff that fill its

a resident at Primary Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City, going to Maine and running a small ICU in Bangor, and then going back to Utah to do my fellowship in pediatric critical care,” said Harrison at the beginning of his talk. “All I ever wanted to be was just the best doctor that I could be. I come from a medical family. I’m a fourth-generation physician. My dad’s a general surgeon and a really good dad. I didn’t see very much of him, so I used to go on rounds with him on Saturday mornings at one of the small hospitals in Pittsburgh, where most of the poor people got taken care of in his practice, and got to see him interact with these patients and it inspired me. So all I ever wanted to do was be like my dad and be a good doctor.”

Unintentional Leader

Harrison shared, “As a young staff pediatric intensivist at Cleveland Clinic, we had financial problems in our ICU, and we were kind of stuck

at a certain number of staff and a certain number of nurse practitioners, and I began to poke around and try and understand why we weren’t making more money. And I was able to discover a couple of simple things and fix them. We were able to hire another ICU doctor, a couple of more nurse practitioners, and at least the way I remember it, I sort of woke up one day and was a department chairman.

“It was not intentional in that I wanted to end up where I am right now, and there are some days when being on call in the ICU sounds really, really, really good. But I guess if I have a philosophy around life, and when younger folks ask me, ‘Can you help me with my career trajectory?’ I just kind of laugh because my approach has been by and large when a door presents itself, open it and then go through it and work as hard as you can, try and minimize the mistakes, and maximize the good things you do and keep moving. And it’s worked pretty well.”

One Door Opens ...

Before taking on his role at Intermountain, perhaps the biggest door Harrison found himself walking through was when he was offered the chance to become the chief executive officer of Cleveland Clinic’s hospital in Abu Dhabi, which was still under construction when Harrison accepted the position.

“When I got there, it was a sandy island with steel sticking out of it,” said Harrison. “I left a job that I loved, doing medical operations for our entire health system, and I took over a team of 35 people, had a stack of construction documents, and a very capable but very anxious partner because I was the fifth guy in five years. And we turned it into something really great.”

Harrison highlighted several key lessons from the experience. The first was that people are more the same than they are different. By the end of his tenure, he had worked with people from over 70 countries. To him, there

was nothing more beautiful than seeing people of different religions, nationalities, and skin color all completely focused on the same thing, which was making health care better in that part of the world. Because of this diversity, particularly in regards to culture and who he had to answer to, Harrison had to adapt quickly and be very careful about choosing the things that he would not bend in his decision making. It was important to be as flexible as possible and respectful and open to the host culture, but equally important to be as hard as nails on the things that he just couldn't change to meet the goal of the hospital's mission.

Perhaps the biggest lesson, however, from Harrison's experience overseas was showing those around him his commitment to a goal. "There's a term I think the Vikings used, 'they burned the boats,'" said Harrison. "We sold our house in the U.S., moved my family over there. It

was actually a big deal for the locals. It said, 'Look, I'm all in.' They had just seen four people who had left before me. My wife was here. My kids were here. If I was going to go back home, it would have to be to someplace other than the organization that I was working for and which I loved. So, I think burning the boats is actually not a bad thing to do when you take on something really, really hard. And look, everybody has moments of doubt or sadness or anger or whatever. But you actually don't lose anything by finishing hard things. I really believe that."

Intermountain Calls

Following his time at Cleveland Clinic, Harrison's next door opened when he was offered the position of president and CEO of Intermountain Healthcare in 2016. At the time of his arrival, Intermountain was a confederation of hospitals whose regions experienced varying degrees of quality and safety. In

some cases, regions were actually competing against each other with their individualized programs. Despite having 39,000 staff and physicians spread across Utah and Idaho—roughly the same geographical footprint of Italy—Harrison helped dismantle this regional configuration, implementing the first restructuring of the group in more than 20 years.

Harrison admits that this reform has been sometimes confusing and challenging, requiring that you adjust where responsibility and accountability lie. Harrison says that when it comes to physician leadership, "it's not herding cats. It's herding lions."

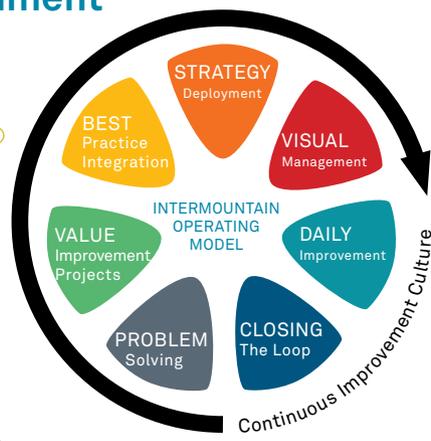
Thankfully, in an effort to better unify Intermountain Healthcare, Harrison was already making beneficial changes to the group's management operating system. "When I got to Intermountain, I did something that I've always tried to do," he said, "which is to understand the strengths of an organization, and then leverage the strengths that exist as hard as I can. And one of the strengths I found was a really, really good continuous improvement process that one of our regional vice presidents adopted. I saw the results they were getting and I loved the approach, which was metrics-driven and mission-oriented.

"We quickly implemented these continuous improvement huddles across the whole enterprise within six months," continued Harrison. "Every single huddle board in the whole place—whether you are in supply chain or in finance or on a regular nursing floor—is oriented around our fundamentals of care, which are safety, quality, patient experience, access, and stewardship. Starting at about 7 a.m.,

Figure 1
Success at Intermountain Healthcare

Operating Alignment

- 42% reduction in serious safety events
- More than 3,000 huddles with a tiered escalation
- Most CMS Star Ratings in our history



- More than 18,500 ideas implemented
- Improved access with 73% of clinics with extended hours
- 90% quality goals met

the first round of huddles take place. By 10 a.m., the sixth level of huddle happens, the C-suite leaders run a huddle, and we hear about every major safety problem that happens, every quality problem that happens of significance, every caregiver that is injured, media-worthy events, etc.

“And I can’t tell you how fast things have changed. In about 18 months, we’ve seen a 42% reduction in serious safety events, our hospitals’ CMS star ratings boomed, shot up. We’ve actually had about 18,000 ideas implemented from frontline staff and almost 2,000 ideas from our doctors. We’ve improved access. We’ve actually met a lot of our quality

goals. So, this continuous improvement process drives our managing operating system. We have interlocking goals that go from the board level to the frontline and back up again. Everyone is driving toward the same goals. And the goals really become crystal clear and I think this helps a lot. It allows me and allows us to think about more strategic things.”

A Part of the Change

As Intermountain continues to take this mission-driven, metrics-powered approach forward,

Three Future-Defining Innovations

Harrison shared areas of focus that are having a profound impact on leadership in health care:

- ▶ **Consumer-centric, digitally enabled health care**
- ▶ **High-value health care and healthier communities**
- ▶ **Nimbleness during turbulent times**

making significant investments in telehealth and home monitoring, patient transportation to and from sites of cares, and precision medicine, Harrison concluded his discussion by pointing out the influx of trends—such as gene therapy, artificial intelligence, and wearable monitoring devices—that



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continue to serve as evidence into just how swiftly medicine is evolving year after year.

“What matters to me is that three years ago, most of these

wouldn't have been very predictable,” he said. “And it just reminds me how darned fast things are changing, and that's why I go back to that nimbleness, having an open mind, and being optimistic, because I know that health care is going to be of higher quality and lower cost. I just want us to be able to be part of the team that gets to deliver it. Because there's no greater honor than taking care

of somebody who's not well. And just based on who we are and what we do, it would just be such a tremendous loss for all of us who are involved but also our communities if we didn't get to be a big part of this.” **GPJ**

Hear Dr. Harrison's colleagues discuss mental health integration at Intermountain Healthcare at the AMGA Institute for Quality Leadership, November 13-15, 2018, in San Antonio, Texas. For details, visit amga.org/iql18.

A. Marc Harrison, M.D., is president and chief executive officer at Intermountain Healthcare. He previously served on the AMGA Board of Directors.

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