

Opinion

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The Lasting Impact of Leadership

The *Boys in the Boat* is the story of the 1936 Olympic Gold Champion rowing team from the University of Washington. The book—also now a movie—tells the story of nine boys, mostly kids from small logging and mining towns in the Pacific Northwest, who managed to stay in college during the Depression and became one of the best rowing teams of all time. I listened to the audiobook while commuting to work and found myself relistening to paragraphs when the wisdom of the words was compelling. I was especially curious about the taciturn and stoic coach Al Ulbrickson and the Yoda-like boatbuilder George Yeoman Pocock. While the story is about the boys, and the obvious theme is about the power of teamwork and trust, a deeper and quieter message is about how Ulbrickson and Pocock created the culture, exacted discipline, took calculated risks, and inspired the team. It's a book about leadership.

Leaders shape organizations and their people. I was fortunate to see all four Academy CEOs—Bruce Spivey, Dunbar Hoskins, David Parke, and Stephen McLeod—at last November's Orbital. Collectively, they have led the organization since its beginning in 1979 when the Academy spun off from the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology. When Dunbar passed away in late January, I had been reading—rather, listening to—*The Boys in the Boat* and reflecting on the power of leadership in our profession, not just at the Academy, but in our practices, health systems, and academic departments. I could turn to hundreds of books on leadership, but it is usually a person we know who has the most impact. Dunbar, for example, provided a master class in leadership (see page 69).

We think of the Academy as an organization that provides clinical education and practice management resources, advocates for the profession, and does research. All of these are central to its mission, but even more important are the standards of excellence it sets for evidence-based care, ethics, and personal accountability. Who we should be as individual ophthalmologists and as ophthalmic organizations is an expectation set by leadership including our CEOs, practice leaders, and boards.

As a case in point, two of my partners, Ed Sung and Brad Sacher, trained at University of Iowa. Not only are they

superb clinicians and surgeons, but also I like to hang out with them. After a visit to the ophthalmology department at University of Iowa, I credit their training institution with instilling at least some of their character and their excellence as colleagues. Iowa has a long tradition of great ophthalmic education, as well as an environment of sharing, collegiality, and kindness. That comes from exceptional leadership over the decades—reaching back to Bruce Spivey and even earlier—and it continues. In a panel discussion at a YO symposium, Iowa chair Keith Carter commented on the importance of culture-building, and I've never forgotten it.

Brad will attend his residency class 10-year reunion next year, something former Iowa residents almost always attend. That's culture-building. It's a quiet reminder of where he came from, the values of the people who trained him, and the interdependence of ophthalmologists (plus, the reunion is fun). Being part of a great organization shapes people. The effect of a good leader percolates—not just through the program or practice—but through the lives of its people, even after they have moved on.

Alison Blake, an ophthalmologist in Ireland, recently rotated off the Academy board where she had served a four-year term as International Trustee. Alison said, "Being on the board of the Academy was the most impactful experience of my entire career, mostly because of the people, but also because of the culture."

Great leaders transmit values that transcend their tenure and are deeper than any one person. Ulbrickson, the crew coach who took nine college kids to win gold at the 1936 Olympics expected excellence, not just in the boat, but in all aspects of their lives including academics and personal habits.

Ophthalmology has many superb leaders. Farewell Dunbar, you were one of them.



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