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We can all be leaders

Guest Editorial on Special JMIRS Issue Leadership,

Dr Christina Malamateniou

When I was asked to curate this special edition on Leadership with Lisa di Prospero late in the autumn of 2021 I jumped on the opportunity with both hands; I knew Lisa's excellent track record, so I really wanted to work with her and learn from her. I also loved the openness of the journal and its interactive nature with the audience through refreshing initiatives and diverse opportunities for original contributions, in what is otherwise an, often, rather conservative world in Academia, all led by Dr Amanda Bolderston and her brilliant editorial team.

I also pursued it because leadership, when you reach this point in your life and your career as I have, becomes more than just a philosophical discussion or academic topic: you can see the effects of good and bad leadership every day in your professional life; you also know what type of leader you are and what type of leadership you absolutely despise. I am sorry I will not go into the theory of leadership in here; I am a very practical person and there are whole textbooks about this topic. I hope you will not mind me, though, sharing some very personal thoughts and stories about leadership below and introducing our excellent articles, each one with its merits, written by some exceptional colleagues in Medical Imaging and radiation therapy (MIRT)/ Radiography and beyond, to which Lisa and I are really grateful.

Lisa, myself and Carly, our managing editor, worked closely together for about a year to get to you the best of radiography and MIRT leadership globally; be it in clinical practice, academia, research, education, collaborative work, advocacy, activism.

This work has highlighted that, radiographers may not always see themselves as natural leaders, although they do all the work and bring significant change! This might relate to the fact that leadership is not extensively studied or is not central in the curriculum of all MIRT undergraduate courses, but it might just also be pure "impostor syndrome" of a profession that is mainly female dominated. It is also a common notion in healthcare, where practitioners see themselves more as lone healers, dedicated to "help others" than celebrated leaders, who will change practice¹.

One of my colleagues recently told me: "I am not a leader, why should I bother with this course on leadership?" I listened to them and said nothing (very uncharacteristic of me and my extroverted personality) but, in reality, I wanted to say so much- and I now regret it I did not speak up. I wanted to say that everyone can be a leader and a follower at different times and I actually had seen them display so many different qualities of a good leader over the previous few years: resilience, hard work, passion, kindness, empathy, integrity, fairness². Why did they not feel ready for it and what does it really take to be a leader and feel like one?

Leadership is not a title, is a calling; you either rise to the circumstances or you are not. It may also be an innate ability, a talent but it can also be taught, cultivated, perfected. It needs a lot of self-knowledge, introspection, and reflection to refine one's leadership style. It takes time and it can change through one's lifetime. There are natural, "born leaders" but there are also ones who learn over time and, in reality, it is partly charisma and partly knowledge that helps shape the leaders of tomorrow³.

Knowledge about leadership can be academic and instruction-led but there is nothing like the learning that comes mainly from facing and overcoming adversity, from facing your wildest fears and from pursuing your dreams, despite these fears. A person, who has not been forged through adversity cannot be a good leader, I think; because it is this challenge that allows you to learn more about yourself, about who you are and how you behave under pressure. It teaches you that, sometimes, the journey counts as much as the destination. It also gives you unique insights and exposes you to a range of emotions, all useful for a leader so they can empathise and support their team, when the time comes. Challenge colours your psyche with shades you never thought could exist; this allows you to feel deeply, act meaningfully and be inclusive, be open to the different views, be supportive to others and kind to them and to yourself, because you realise everyone is on a journey. It also allows you to be fearless and bold. So, challenge should be welcomed as a huge learning opportunity and not being seen as something to be avoided or feared, exactly like when you ride a wave. This is because you can only learn when you stretch yourself and go outside your comfort zone; and leaders often do this really well⁴!

There is a lot of pressure put on leaders; only natural, because leadership goes hand-in-hand with responsibility, with measuring outcomes, with performance assessments, with monitoring progress, with hitting targets⁵. But it is also hugely fulfilling, because leaders get unique views of a situation, are afforded rare insights and information, can see the forest beyond the tree and can be the ones who bring on much needed change in a team, an organisation or in society; there is nothing more rewarding than conceptualising a vision, sticking to the mission, co-ordinating its implementation and then being lucky enough to be around to see the outcomes of an idea put in practice. How wonderful when these results are about improving people's lives, like it is often the case in healthcare and in MIRT's work.

Our leaders sharing their experiences in this special issue are all healthcare professionals, researchers, practitioners, students, academics, policymakers, predominantly -but not only - from an MIRT background. Some of them lead radiography teams and some of them multidisciplinary teams. They come from all corners of the world: from North America to South Africa, from South America to different countries in Europe and the Middle East. What they have in common is their personal story of overcoming obstacles (and there were many!), of determination, their resilience, their strength, their passion and their constant effort to improve, knowing their own limitations and acknowledging the challenges around them. They also know that leadership is not a static notion, it evolves and therefore they know how to be adjustable.

They are working parents, “jugglers -in-residence and by choice”, who study and work fulltime, inspiring professionals who speak on the importance of kindness, radiographers who work under challenging conditions on the frontline, visionaries who break tradition in education, research, practice and policy and cross disciplines. They are also so different to each other: all genders, all ages, all races, all areas of practice, all social backgrounds; this shows that leadership is not (and should not be) the privilege of the middle-aged, white, male professional but an achievement open to anyone, wherever they come from, as long as they rise up to the challenge and immerse themselves in it⁶.

Everyone can be a leader and a follower at different times. Sometimes deciding to be a follower is an amazing act of leadership because it means you can help the team from a different position, in a “shared leadership model”⁷. You also need to know your weaknesses and strengths, be able to delegate to the ones who can deliver, say “sorry”, “thank you” and acknowledge your limitations. This is the stuff great leaders are made of.

Leadership is most important at the time of adversity, like the times we experience now, to build the necessary resilience and optimism in the team and inspire them to carry forward^{8,9}. No other sector has been impacted more during this pandemic than healthcare, due to its impact on the frontline workers’ workload and wellbeing, physical and emotional. Leadership is also vital at times of calm, to allow to celebrate successes and build the “buffers” needed to weather the storm, when it comes back again (because it will come back, you can count on this). So here is to good leaders and to calmer times ahead!

That was a short, very personal, account on leadership. One that, hopefully, can offer some insights into what I think leadership should be about. Maybe some people will feel inspired by it or it will, at least, help some of you find your own leadership style or enable you to become bolder and jump on a leadership opportunity you have been contemplating for some time. YOU CAN DO IT!

Sincerest thanks to Dr Amanda Bolderston for the amazing opportunity, to Lisa and Carly for amazing work ethic, to co-ordinate and navigate this special edition, and to all our valued authors, for working to deliver an exciting collection of leadership papers for you, only.

I hope you enjoy the learning and the discussion of our collection of papers, following the editorials.

All the best,

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