Residents Climbing Mountains

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Beyond mountains there are mountains.—Haitian proverb

The accreditation requirements for family medicine residencies state that programs “should include training to provide leadership for a clinical practice, a hospital staff, professional organizations, and community leadership skills to advocate for the public health.”¹

One of the methods we use to teach leadership skills combines the use of physician role models with movies to illustrate leadership theories. In preparation for this presentation, residents are asked to respond to the following questions in writing: Who has been an inspirational leader for you? What do you perceive to be your strengths/weaknesses as a leader?

We begin the presentation with the Haitian proverb quoted above from which the title of Tracy Kidder’s book, Mountains Beyond Mountains, was derived.² In it, Kidder describes how Paul Farmer, MD, PhD, became an international physician leader in the treatment of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) and AIDS for people living in poverty.

Utilizing Mountains Beyond Mountains and portions of a “60 Minutes” segment profiling Paul Farmer,³ we describe how Farmer helped start a two-room medical clinic in Haiti in the 1980s that grew into a fully equipped, modern hospital. To help support his work, Dr Farmer established a nonprofit organization called Partners in Health and then recruited a fellow Harvard MD/PhD anthropology student, Jim Kim, to join the organization.⁴ Based on their work with Partners in Health, Farmer and Kim were recognized as two of America’s best leaders by US News and World Report.⁵

In the 1990s, Farmer and Kim expanded their work beyond Haiti to include treating MDR-TB in Peru. Their leadership in treating tuberculosis was featured in a 2005 documentary titled “Rx for Survival.”⁶ We show segments of the documentary describing how they discovered that the World Health Organization’s (WHO) protocols for treating tuberculosis were failing to treat MDR-TB in Peru, thus inspiring them to initiate an experiment to prove that MDR-TB could be treated in poor communities. Their efforts directly challenged WHO’s existing policy of not treating MDR-TB, described by Kim as not being “public health” but “sort of like public death.”

After being introduced to Farmer and Kim as physician leader role models, the residents shared the identities of those whom they had chosen as their inspirational leaders. For one, it was her mother because of her ability to believe in others and encourage them to achieve things beyond their own expectations. Another chose her grandmother because of her love for education and resolve that women in India should have equal rights and opportunities for education. Other inspirational leaders included Mahatma Gandhi, Israeli General Yigal Allon for starting a program that gave soldiers the opportunity to complete their education while serving in the army, and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for their dedication to the service of others.

Next, we turn to the work of Harvard Business School Professor Linda Hill, who focuses on leadership in emerging economies and the relationship between leadership and innovation. Based on her international work, Hill predicts that leadership in the 21st century will be defined by what she calls “leading from behind” and “leadership as collective genius.” She contrasts these forms of leadership with traditional Western leadership where the leader develops a vision and then inspires others to follow.
In our first scene, Commander Jim Lovell is taking a Congressional delegation on a tour of NASA and emphasizes that the “astronaut is only the most visible member of a very large team.” In the next clip, a seemingly routine third manned trip to the moon turns out to be anything but routine when an oxygen tank explodes, leaving the command module with very little power. What power the command module has left needs to be saved for the return trip to earth. The crew survives by moving into the lunar module and using it as a lifeboat. During this scene, Lovell says the famous line, “Houston, we have a problem.”

The next scene takes place in Houston’s Mission Control Center where we see Gene Kranz, the Apollo 13 flight director, step to the front to lead the mission’s team through this crisis, insisting that “Failure is not an option!” Kranz’s leadership and determination not to fail were challenged by the fact that the lunar module “lifeboat” was only equipped to sustain two people for 2 days but now had to keep three people alive for 4 days. It quickly became apparent that the carbon dioxide filters had to be modified to accommodate the additional breathing of the three astronauts. We watch Kranz leading from behind as his creative team solves the carbon dioxide problem. In the closing scenes of the movie, we see Lovell praise his fellow astronauts and then watch their suspenseful return to earth. Their safe return was accomplished by hundreds of people being led from the front, as well as from behind, harnessing their collective genius to bring the astronauts home.

After seeing Hill’s leadership theories illustrated by these three movies, the residents could appreciate the pros and cons of each leadership style while sharing their own strengths and weaknesses as leaders. One resident listed her strengths as “teamwork, collaboration, and an ability to consider all ideas.” Another said she prefers to lead by example and first listen to others before making her own decisions. A third-year resident said her “sense of humor is my secret weapon along with my irresistible smile.”

Following “Apollo 13,” we return to “Rx for Survival” to see how Farmer and Kim apply Hill’s leadership concepts to their experiment in treating MDR-TB patients in Peru. In the clips that are shown, we see how Farmer and Kim use their backgrounds in anthropology to lead from behind by creating a system of paid community health workers who actually take the lead in treating patients. Simultaneously, they also led from the front; by reducing the cost for treating one MDR-TB patient from $15,000 to $1,500, they virtually eliminated cost as an argument against treating MDR-TB. In the final segment of the documentary, we learn that Farmer’s and Kim’s successful treatment of MDR-TB convinced WHO to change their policy from one of refusal to one of support for treating this disease.

After the presentation, one of our residents read Mountains Beyond Mountains and said that it inspired her to pursue her interest in public health and health care policy. By nurturing and teaching leadership skills using movies and role models such as Farmer and Kim in our residency programs, we can hopefully inspire our residents to climb the health care mountains they may encounter while practicing family medicine.

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