

Your personality, your leadership

Deirdre Wallace, clinical skills manager at UCL Medical School, discusses the importance of learning about leadership and self while at medical school.

Approximately five years ago, I was charged with leading a team to introduce leadership and management in healthcare to the undergraduate curriculum at UCL Medical School. I am sure some readers will sympathise that gaining space in the already crammed curriculum was, hands down, the most difficult part of this task. We found space for a half-day course in Year 4 and a full-day course in Year 5.

Time is limited to do justice to such an important topic. It was important to us that course content had to be relevant, meaningful and something the students could put into practice immediately. Although there is a general consensus that we need to introduce leadership and management to the undergraduate medical curriculum, the guidance is a little vague with regards to exactly what to teach, when, by whom and how.

Medical students don't recognise themselves as having a leadership role, so we focus on their role as part of the team emphasising patient safety, situational leadership and the need to be empowered to speak up as a patient advocate. We illustrate the latter by using both video content and a 'leadership in action' narrative shared by a junior doctor.

As part of the research into course content, I carried out a series of interviews with several local healthcare leaders, junior doctors and nurses to glean their thoughts on curriculum content within this domain. When I asked, 'what was the most important thing you learned on a leadership course?' all replied that what they learned about themselves and how others perceived them was the most significant learning point. It was important for us to include learning about 'self' into our courses and to do it in an effective, safe and supportive manner.

I was fortunate enough to gain support from Professor Aidan Haligan and Steve Andrews, who both fuelled the development of a NHS Staff College Senior Leadership Programme. This programme has 'managing self' and 'managing others' at its core. It has a significant military influence with regard to team-building exercises which are a fun yet effective way of initiating discussion on teamwork, leadership style, negotiation, persuasion, effectiveness and time management. We adopted several of these exercises to use on the Year 5 course. With the help of a grant from Health Education England, we were able to consult with Andrews on a professional

level when developing and delivering the Year 5 course in its first year.

Students gain feedback from their peers and from faculty during their performance on the leadership tasks. To provide a safe environment for this, we scheduled a 30-minute workshop within the course on delivering feedback. The faculty manages this process diligently to ensure nothing inappropriate is said.



Personality trait questionnaires are also a common tool used on courses to initiate discussion on self, and discovering how the rest of the world perceives you. UCL's professor of psychology, Adrian Furnham, offered expert guidance on the use of the Five-Factor Model of Personality. There is a significant amount of social science evidence surrounding this particular trait questionnaire compared to other popular models. It is easy to use, freely accessible and provides a wealth of discussion points once completed.

Many of the students find the course fun yet challenging. Although we promote a healthy scepticism when analysing the results of the Five-Factor questionnaire, they are often disappointed when they do not gain a profile that suggests they will be the perfect leader. This requires sensitivity and careful classroom and individual management by faculty. The students are offered individual follow-up conversations should they request it.

The student voice is incredibly important to us at UCL, and it is used to inform course design and evaluate course content. Most students really enjoy the day and commented on how they now realise that leadership is not just for people in senior positions, and they should 'step up and do the right thing' in certain situations. Many of those who are introverts feel empowered when they learn that introverts make great leaders. Most of these students have been under the impression that being an introvert has excluded them from a leadership role.

A very poignant comment from one of the students was, 'it is OK to be me'.

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