

From the President's Desk: Leaders by nature

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December 2021—When I became a pathologist more than 20 years ago, I never imagined I would have the opportunity to serve as chief medical officer at a hospital. But I can see from my new position how a background in pathology has prepared me for hospital leadership. In fact, the very traits that led us to become pathologists are the ones that make so many of us natural leaders.

We are nimble thinkers who can simultaneously appreciate the big picture and the tiny details. Likewise, we can think concurrently about population health and individual patients. Our ability to see and understand these perspectives so clearly is a huge advantage.

Because our specialty touches many different aspects of medicine, we are comfortable interacting with all segments of the health care system—from operative services and radiology to the emergency department, medical wards, and ambulatory setting. We develop relationships with clinicians of all types. Many of us go into operating rooms and into radiology every day, regularly interact with the emergency department to make sure troponins are being reported properly or to manage blood transfusions, and routinely deal with point-of-care issues in the ambulatory setting. We work with the ICU team to ensure appropriate and timely testing of lactic acid, and we work with the infection control team to manage the rates of blood culture contamination.

In short, every time you turn around in a health system, a pathologist is involved. And this breadth of top-to-bottom engagement with all areas of a health system provides a unique and valuable view of how all the departments function and interact with each other.



Dr. Volk

And, of course, we are sticklers for quality. Thanks to CLIA '88, we are comfortable dealing with quality and data. We are accustomed to doing things in an organized and structured fashion. We deal with government regulations with aplomb. And we have proved to ourselves and to others that these efforts are not in vain. Indeed, each of us can point to numerous instances in which we have effected real and sustained objective success.

This sense that we are natural leaders is something pathologists often do not appreciate about themselves. I worry that too many of us believe we are not as capable as physicians in other specialties—how many of us have heard a colleague say we are just pathologists, not clinicians? That is wholly inaccurate: Pathologists *absolutely* are clinicians. We need to remember that patients fare better when pathologists are engaged in their care.

Some people fear that reinforcing our importance in medicine is too self-promotional. But it is nothing to be ashamed of. Promoting what we have to offer as a specialty is good for our patients.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered us a unique opportunity to take a seat at the leadership table. It put pathologists at the vanguard, reminding policymakers, patients, and other clinicians about the importance of laboratory testing and the critical need for accurate results.

It is time for all of us to consider how we can build on our skills as pathologists to take on leadership roles. I see leadership as an exercise in generosity. Modeling compassion and excellence, and treating the people we work with in the laboratory with courtesy, kindness, and respect—that's being a leader. Learning to identify your team's talents and going out of your way to recognize their success are incredibly powerful tools for any leader.

You can also volunteer to take on more responsibility. Most hospitals and health systems are looking for physicians to be involved in their executive, credentialing, and infection control committees, and the various hospital quality committees as well as utilization review initiatives. Just being willing to participate is a huge first step. If you are in a private practice group, you can volunteer your time to be on the board of your private practice or to participate in peer review or mentoring newer associates. Another great option is engaging with community organizations to serve on panels to share factual information about COVID-19 vaccines and fill other public health needs.

However you do it, I encourage you to find ways to explore your own leadership potential. Our training as pathologists is an incredible foundation that has given us so much to offer our patients and our clinical colleagues.

As we close out 2021, I hope that you and yours find time to enjoy this holiday season. For my family, that means getting together, eating a big meal, watching favorite movies, and enjoying each other's company. I wish the same spirit of togetherness for all of you.□

Dr. Volk welcomes communication from CAP members. Write to her at president@cap.org.