Director's Forum

Patterning Your Department After Great Leaders: John D. Rockefeller

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Abstract

Learning through the examples of great leaders can provide pharmacy directors with guidance on how to shape their leadership style. John D. Rockefeller was one of the most successful businessmen in the world, and he is highly regarded as having been a great leader. His example of having the courage of his convictions will be necessary as pharmacy faces drastic changes ahead in pharmacy provider status and practice model changes. His management of his staff serves as an excellent example of the importance of staff retention programs. As health systems strive to do more with less, it is now more important than ever to scrutinize using resources and apply Rockefeller's attention to efficiency and effectiveness when growing patient-centered pharmacy services.

I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty.

—John D. Rockefeller

Learning through the examples of great leaders can provide pharmacy directors with guidance on how to shape their leadership style. In January 2015, *Director's Forum* highlighted Sir Winston Churchill. Churchill's leadership style demonstrated taking risks and learning from failure, being decisive, practicing clear and simple communication, being committed to self-improvement, and successfully managing people. This month, we will focus on John D. Rockefeller.

John D. Rockefeller was one of the most successful businessmen in the history of the world, and he is highly regarded as having been a great leader. Rockefeller's upbringing seemed far from one scripted to produce the world's richest man. He was the oldest son of a peddler who struggled to make ends meet. His mother was a devout Christian and worked tirelessly to raise 6 children. The family was transient and moved several times in upstate New York before settling in Cleveland, Ohio. Although Rockefeller's family was not wealthy, it was rich in the values of honesty, hard work, and humility. Rockefeller learned

how to earn money and hold on to it and he also learned to put God first in his life, to be honest, and to help others. Based on this upbringing, Rockefeller saw a strong spiritual life as being essential to a good business life.¹

Rockefeller revolutionized the petroleum industry through his work with his business partner and fellow church member, Samuel Andrews. Rockefeller was focused on efficiency and was appalled by the waste that existed in the industry and the fluctuating price of the product. He stood out from his competitors in working to get more kerosene per barrel of crude oil and trying to find a use for the by-products.¹ Having the largest oil company was never one of Rockefeller's goals, but the savings that could be realized with such a large operation were, to him, irresistible.

Those who are not familiar with Mr. Rockefeller may assume that he was greedy, obsessed with working, and fixated on growing his wealth. "John D" saw business as a means to living a life devoted to others. He was not interested in wealth, but was passionate about his religion and spent a lot of time at church functions with his family. He also was an adamant philanthropist who supported his church, educational institutions, and biomedical research. He gave \$80 million to the University of Chicago, helped

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to found Central Philippine University, Spelman College, and Rockefeller University. He also created the Rockefeller Foundation, which endowed Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health and funded an international hookworm eradication campaign.¹

The goal of this article is to highlight the leadership traits that John D. Rockefeller exhibited in order to become a successful businessman and to apply these traits to pharmacy leadership. This article will specifically focus on John D's traits of perseverance, leadership courage, benevolence toward others, honesty, and balanced priorities.

ROCKEFELLER'S LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Perseverance

Rockefeller is well known for his perseverance in business. He once said, "I do not think that there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance. It overcomes almost everything, even nature."³ Many people doubted that the oil industry could be profitable due to all of the waste involved with the refining process. Rockefeller believed that the waste could be dramatically reduced; he found uses for many of the by-products and was able to sell them for a profit. The savings spanned all areas of the company, and Rockefeller chose to invest more money into building top facilities. Standard Oil insourced just about everything they could in order to save money. They hired their own plumber and made their own barrels. The profits from the company were directed right back into making the operation bigger and better. They ultimately developed over 300 by-products from a barrel of oil and took advantage of their market share to get a discount on rail shipping. His competitors could not compete with the price of his oil, and Standard Oil eventually bought out many of them.^{1,2}

Pharmacists have a strong history of perseverance, as the profession has come a long way from the days of strict dispensing without counseling. Despite the political barriers, pharmacists can now be found rounding on patients in hospitals, giving immunizations, and independently managing chronic diseases in the outpatient clinic setting. As the profession strives to achieve provider status, pharmacy directors must have the courage of their convictions to promote such status in their institutions. The clinical privileging of pharmacists within institutional settings can provide enhanced service to patients while improving operational efficiency, but there is not widespread support for this practice.

Opponents of clinical privileging of pharmacists fear that they may abuse these privileges by acting beyond their scope of practice. In addition, there is

little published data to show the benefit of allowing pharmacists to independently perform functions currently assigned to other providers (nurse practitioners, physician assistants). Pharmacists are more costly compared to these providers, and it will be a challenge to prove the cost-effectiveness of such programs. Several hospitals are experiencing success with clinical privileging including Johns Hopkins, St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, the Public Health Service, and the Veteran's Affairs Health Administration.⁴ The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center is studying the impact of clinical privileging in managing antibiotic therapy for emergency department patients.

Pharmacy directors need to remain steadfast in their support of credentialing and privileging. Pharmacists have the comprehensive training necessary to properly use medications for the treatment, management, and prevention of diseases and can be an asset to the health care team and patients alike. This movement continues to gain momentum, and pharmacists must continue to use research-based evidence to support their role.

Leadership Courage

Rockefeller was known for having the courage of his convictions, which on several occasions led to great success. In the early 1880s, the American oil industry was threatened as the oil supplies in Pennsylvania were depleted. Russia's oil supply serviced foreign markets once held by Standard Oil. Rockefeller courageously staked the future of the company on oil sources in Ohio, which were considered by many to be undesirable due to its sulfur smell. Rockefeller believed that Ohio oil could be purified, and he hired 2 chemists to work on the problem. When he set out to build the infrastructure necessary to support the distribution of the Ohio oil, the board of Standard Oil blocked the funding. Feeling confident, Rockefeller risked his own finances to support the initiative. The board then reversed their decision and grudgingly funded the necessary infrastructure to refine the Ohio oil. The risk taken by John Rockefeller and the investment he made later proved to be key to the survival of Standard Oil.¹

Pharmacy leaders can learn from Rockefeller's commitment to his goals and his willingness to stand by his vision. This is particularly applicable when it comes to changing the practice model at an institution. Most people are inherently resistant to change, because it can be both frightening and uncomfortable. The director of the department must take the

role of the courageous leader throughout such a change and clearly communicate the reasons behind it in order to bolster staff support. It is easy for a leader to step into an organization and continue the status quo, but the best leaders will take the opportunity to analyze the model and make the necessary improvements. It is best for leaders to ask whether the model truly optimizes patient care or whether it only placates the staff and minimizes complaints.

Benevolence Toward Others

John D. Rockefeller was also known for selecting the right people of the job and then treating them well. The employees within his company were often referred to as the “Standard Oil family,” and everyone worked together to achieve the company’s goals. Rockefeller routinely praised his employees, and it was not uncommon for him to join them in their work and urge them on. Rockefeller believed in giving his employees praise, rest, and comfort in order to get the best work out of them. He offered long vacations at full pay for weary leaders, but these leaders did not stay away from the business very long because they were so committed to the growth and success of the company.¹

This characteristic of Rockefeller brings to light an area of opportunity for health-system pharmacy leaders. As leaders get promoted and become department administrators, they spend less time on the front line of the operation of the department and can become disconnected from the issues the staff encounters on a daily basis. They are especially distanced from the pharmacy technicians who do the majority of the work to ensure that every patient has the medications they need at the right time. As a leader, it is easy to get caught up in meetings or stuck in the office, but those leaders who make the effort to get to know their employees and join them in the operation are the true standouts. These efforts create big wins in terms of staff morale and departmental culture. People generally do not mind working hard, but they do require recognition and appreciation to stay motivated.

Rockefeller not only knew business, but he understood what made people “tick” and his influence swept through the ranks of Standard Oil.¹ Every pharmacy leader can learn from Rockefeller and apply these skills. He once said, “Good leadership consists in showing average people how to do the work of superior people.”³ When the leader shows commitment to the staff, the staff will show commitment to the workplace. Leaders should know the names

of everyone in the department and make a point to visit with staff frequently (daily is recommended) to hear their concerns and ideas. It is important to have an open door policy, so employees will feel comfortable approaching you as a leader, but reaching out to them directly really sends the message of caring. As many of our colleagues attend clinical rounds on a daily basis, these so-called “leadership rounds” should be blocked off on the calendar.

Honesty

John D’s upbringing and faith regularly translated into his business practices. He prided himself on being honest and was a noted stickler about clearing his debts. If a single cent was owed to a supplier or contractor, he wanted it to be paid. Similarly, if a debtor owed money to Standard Oil, he wanted it repaid immediately. His exacting attention to his finances was a nuisance to some, but many businessmen appreciated his efforts, and this is what propelled him to success at such a young age. As he grew older and became an oil magnate, he applied the same honest principles to Standard Oil. His extreme wealth caused many to question the way it was earned, and he was often accused of making illegal decisions or forcing his competitors to merge with Standard Oil. Rockefeller adamantly denied these claims. He explained that the amalgamated companies were what drove the efficiencies and that many of his rivals were happy to merge with Standard Oil because they had so little faith in the oil industry. In fact, many of the business owners refused to be paid in stock options and demanded cash.¹ Rockefeller once said, “I believe it is a duty for a man to get all the money he honestly can and give all he can.”⁵

Honesty goes a long way in any organization, but it is especially valuable in large, complex organizations such as hospitals where department heads are given a significant amount of authority and independence. Pharmacy directors should be especially honest when working on the annual capital and operating budget. As health systems strive to do more with less, it is more important than ever to scrutinize requests and to fully understand the difference between what is truly needed and what can wait. Departments can get into the habit of working within their silo and lose sight of the bigger picture. It is always important to remember that there are a finite number of resources within a health system and when resources are awarded to the pharmacy, other departments will have to do without. Leaders who

work openly with colleagues throughout the hospital have a direct impact on patient care. An honest evaluation of the need for additional resources will allow for the best patient experience possible.

Balanced Priorities

John D. Rockefeller was able to balance the priorities in his life while becoming one of the most successful business leaders of all time. He put God first, his family second, and career third. He once said, "Early I learned to work and to play. My life has been one long, happy holiday; Full of work and full of play. I dropped the worry on the way. God was good to me every day."¹

Leaders enjoy the efficiency new technology provides, yet they are plagued by the omnipresent connection and stress of the workplace. E-mails, phone calls, and text pages are standard in the industry. While the commitment to being available shows dedication, it can wear on even the most enthusiastic pharmacy leaders. We live in a society where those who are the first to arrive and last to leave are heralded as the hardest workers. Allison Gabriel, an assistant professor of management at Virginia Commonwealth University who studies job demands and employee motivation states, "When you are constantly draining your resources, you are not being as productive as you can be. If you get depleted, we see performance decline. You're able to persist less and have trouble solving tasks."⁶

The balance in Rockefeller's life allowed him to be productive while keeping a level head. An admirable quality of Rockefeller is that nobody can ever remember him losing his temper.¹ This not only demonstrates professionalism, but it also creates a culture where employees feel comfortable approaching their leaders with concerns. Front-line staff can almost always predict a problem before it becomes an issue, but they may not feel comfortable bringing these issues to light. When problems arise, it is never appropriate to lash out at employees. Instead of inciting panic, pharmacy leaders can learn from Rockefeller by trying to turn a disaster into an opportunity. Each mistake made within the department usually brings with it a valuable lesson to be learned. Great leaders understand that once an error has been made, blaming others and losing composure does not do anything to rectify the situation. Those who lead a balanced life are better able to compartmentalize the issue and understand the big picture. Errors have lead to the

widespread adoption of pharmacy automation such as barcode medication administration, and patient safety has now dramatically improved throughout the country.

Leading a department of pharmacy has many similarities with leading a major corporation such as Standard Oil. Creating a strategic plan is of the utmost importance, and staying committed to the goals despite the popular opinion is key to the success. Great leaders also must understand the influence of their staff and harness that power to drive alignment and achievement of the departmental goals. Finally, it is important to live a balanced life in order to remain at the top of your game while at work.

CONCLUSION

The practice of pharmacy and the refining of oil do not have much in common, but leading people within any organization requires a similar set of skills. John D. Rockefeller is regarded as one of the most successful business leaders of all time, and his success was surely more than just a coincidence. He had several noteworthy traits that made him stand out including perseverance, leadership courage, benevolence toward others, honesty, and balance in priorities. With the rapid changes in health care today, the keen pharmacy leader should learn from his success and apply these principles in developing patient-centered pharmacy services.

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