

John Mendelsohn, MD talks about The Leadership Experience

Dr. Mendelsohn came to MD Anderson in 1996 to serve as the institution's third president. In an interview conducted in 2012 he talks about how he approached the critical first hundred days as president. Dr. Mendelsohn passed away in 2019.



The First Hundred Days

You've got to have a budget.... The budget guy for the cancer center said, "We've got to cut another \$70 million." We had already cut \$90 million. The budget officer for the hospital said, "Don't cut more than \$10 million." The faculty said, "Don't cut another penny. You've got to put more money in. We're on life support right now." I don't think I want to go into all the tensions that I saw, but this was a very tense place that was at a crossroads.

I got incredible advice... I spent some time with the head of Sears Roebuck....I said, "I'm going to be going down to lead a large cancer center with a budget of \$600 million, and I've had some experience running UCSD's cancer center. Can you give me some advice?" He said, "Yes, don't do anything for 100 days, and go around and meet everybody and find out what makes the place tick and what they think needs to be done, because they know, and you don't." So I did that. I'm a yellow tablet guy. I made arrangements to meet with each of the departments the first 100 days. I go into a room, sometimes with 50 or 100 people in it, and I'd sit down in a chair in front of them and say, "I have one question for you. If you had my job, what would you do differently so your job would work out better and you'd be able to achieve your goals?" They just poured it out, and I took notes, and assimilated it.

We had cut the budget over 2 or 3 years by \$90 million....I found out that everybody had a different need. Some people said that we need more secretaries. We need orderlies. The operating room needed this. What I figured out, probably wisely, was I had gotten good advice. They knew what was needed. Instead of cutting budgets, if each of them got a little extra money that they could put into what they needed, it would work. We had a big faculty leadership meeting offsite within a month, and I wanted to discuss what was needed here. I kept getting complaints about how long it took to get x-rays read and get pathology reports. It was ruining the efficiency of the clinics. I'm getting this from the medical oncologists and the surgeons and the radiotherapists. It was pretty clear to me that in the eyes of the faculty here, they were the guts of cancer care. Pathology and radiology were looked upon as primarily ancillary support services.

At the end of this meeting, I remember I was summing it up. I said, "You know what I've heard you tell me? For the next 30 recruitments here, the majority have to go to pathology and radiology, not to your departments that you've been talking with me about, because they're very important for cancer care, and we're woefully understaffed and under-resourced in those departments." Everybody shook their heads in amazement, but then they said, "You're right." We redid the whole pathology department and gave it a lot of resources, and we strengthened the radiology department. That's the kind of things that turned up by listening to the faculty.

About This Content

This interview clip was taken from an in-depth interview conducted for the Making Cancer History Voices Oral History Project. This ongoing project currently contains almost 400 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

The content is available for all uses.

To explore the full interview go to: <http://mdanderson.libguides.com/MendelsohnJ>

About the speaker: John Mendelsohn served as the 3rd President of MD Anderson from 1996 – 2011 after which he assumed directorship of the Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Institute for Personalized Cancer Therapy.

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