

Martin Raber, MD tells a story of Leadership Experience

Medical Oncologist, Martin Raber, served as MD Anderson's Associate Vice President for Patient Care (1992 -1994), Physician in Chief (1994 – 1996), and Vice President of Managed Care and Outreach Programs (1996 -1998). Here he talks about his choice to go into administration and sketches one factor in his success.



Deciding to Become an Administrator

If a faculty member came to me for advice, I would say to him, “Stay out of hospital administration. Stay out of hospital politics. Work on your program. Make your ideas a reality.” I always use the analogy—I say, “Keep the headlights on and your foot on the gas pedal. And don’t get hung up on these other problems that the institution has or that are political or that your department head has or your division head has. Keep focusing on what you came here to accomplish.... If you get hung up in the local politics and the local administration, your career development suffers and it’s harder for you to move and you’re always looked down upon by people with scientific accomplishments because your science hasn’t gone along at the same speed that theirs has” It was true twenty years ago, and it’s true today.

I took the opposite advice. I decided early on in my career that I was going to work at the institutional level and make decisions for the institute that I thought would make it a better institution—a better deliverer of care, a better institution. So I defined myself early on as an institutional player rather than someone who was playing for their own success....

I enjoyed that kind of work.... I just had a good sense for administration. I had a good sense for people. I’m a fairly intuitive person and for most people, if I sit and talk with you for a few minutes, I’m going to understand what you want to accomplish, I’m going to understand what’s driving you. And if I understand what you want to accomplish and I understand what’s driving you, then I have the opportunity to put you in a position that allows you to accomplish what you want to accomplish, plays to your strengths, and also serves the institution. And what can I say? ... I was good at that pretty much from the start. So it was an easy fit for me.... When you look at a research scientist and you ask, “What’s going to tell you this scientist is going to make it—he’s going to persevere, he’s going to make it, he’s going to be an associate professor and a professor, he’s going to be a successful academic?” You’ve got to be smart. You’ve got to like working in a laboratory. You’ve got to be driven by the questions and love answering questions. And you have to be lucky. Why do you have to be lucky? Well, one of the great predictors for academic success is early success.... So if you have early success, it’s really helpful. I had early administrative success—early projects that I tried to do worked out really well, and that was really helpful to me. So I didn’t take the advice I’d give everyone, and I decided to define myself as an institutional player, as opposed to playing my own game. And for me that was advantageous.

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 500 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

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