An MD Anderson Story About: Leadership Principles

Raphael Pollock, MD, PhD
Chair, Dep’t of Surgical Oncology
(1993-2010)

Listening
And
Servant Leadership

St. Francis says, “Seek ye to listen rather than to be listened to,” which I think is the most powerful leadership precept of anything that I’ve ever read. As soon as you are seeking to listen, you’re opening yourself up to empathy—empathizing with someone else. Can you put yourself in their shoes? Can you look through their eyes and see what the horizon looks like? Can you remember back to when you were a first-year assistant professor and it looked like there were these giants walking the earth who could crush you with a single step? Can you think about how terrified you were about taking on new things that you didn’t know how to do yet with mentorship available? Can you think about that? Are you able to still recreate that in your mind? As soon as you make the commitment to listening, you open yourself up to empathy and you open your mind up to someone else. If you’re going to be a leader, particularly if you’re going to practice servant leadership, you have to think about this from the perspective of what does someone else want to accomplish. And that includes people who may not have as much insight or experience or native talent or whatever.

So I think that listening is really where this all comes from, and being patient. Letting someone struggle to express their idea rather than just imposing your idea if they can’t get the idea out quick enough is really important, because that ultimately builds trust. You become reliable, and that’s what so many people are looking for in this day and age. What they so often don’t find is reliability, empathy, the willingness to listen, the willingness to think about someone else’s issue selflessly.