

Donna K. Sollenberger tells a story about Leading Leaders and the Institution

Ms. Sollenberger served as Division Administrator for MD Anderson's Division of Surgery and Anesthesiology (1991 – 1993) and as VP for Hospitals and Clinics (1993 – 1997). She left the institution in 1997 to take on the role of CEO of University of Texas Medical Branch. In an interview conducted in 2013, she talks about helping the head of the Division of Surgery implement Charles LeMaistre's new division system of administration.



Building Support for a New Administrative Structure

Dr. Charles Balch was the Division Head for Surgery and Anesthesiology, a wonderful man, lots of vision, but he needed an administrator who could help him focus the agenda and actually get things done. I think he helped me develop, but I think I also was helpful to him to realize when you have nine chairs—they're not all going to agree to everything, all you need is one vote to keep things from going forward.

I don't think they saw the value in the division and so part of my job was to demonstrate that there was value. There was obviously value in the work that was going on in their departments, but there were larger things we could do collectively that would be of great value, as well. I worked with lots of really good people of high stature internationally who felt they were in a structure that didn't maybe recognize that. Once you get to these chair roles, there's an expectation that stature is also part of how you report up in the organization, and are you part of the strategy and decision making. I think that the chairs felt the division structure may have inhibited that.

It was clear that the departmental leaders were not really used where they were helping to set the strategy for the division that fit into the larger organizational strategy. So we started having department chair meetings. We met as a group with Dr. Balch and the nine department chairs, and we worked on a strategic plan. I remember there was a resistance to share information. There wasn't a lot of transparency. No one really shared with them information about other departments, even though they were in the strategic leadership group for the division. I remember we prepared for our first strategic planning session. I said to Dr. Balch, "I think we ought to share the financial statements of each of the departments and show how it rolls up to the division." He agreed with that. I said, "I think we also want to share the recruitment plans that each of them have, because to some extent you've got Anesthesiology sitting over here developing a recruitment plan that is not even informed by who are the surgeons that we're going to hire. Then how do you share those at the division level so Radiology knows who we're going to need to hire because we're hiring all these surgeons or Pathology—" I mean—you name it. So we let each department chair talk about what their plans for their department were—what they wanted to see. Then we cataloged that and had subsequent meetings around whether

these were all the needs or all the plans they'd like to effect—obviously, there's not enough people, money, and space to do all of that, so let's collectively decide how to prioritize the hires, the various programs they wanted to develop, and the allocation of the space.

I remember Dr. Von Eschenbach, a very strong, good leader in his own right. He said to me, "You know, I really just thought this would be another waste of time." But he said, "I think this is really useful." We did develop a plan. We had a lot going on regarding allocation of OR space and clinic space and the new space in the research building. We began linking the research desires that they had with the clinical and how did that all fit together. I think that people got excited about that because they saw that as a future, a way forward.

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/SollenbergerD>

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