
The SOMC Leadership Culture

An Informed Consent and Commitment Document
For Aspiring SOMC Leaders

Kendall L. Stewart, MD, MBA, DFAPA

Approved by the SOMC Executive Staff

January 1, 2014

Introduction

This document is designed to give you pause. You are considering whether you will become a member of the SOMC administrative team. This is not a decision you should take lightly. The obligations you are about to assume will change the course of your life. If you join this team, you will experience frustration, failure and extreme discomfort on a regular basis. You will take heat for what you do and what you don't do and for doing the wrong things—and the right things. However hard you think this job may be, it will be harder than you thought. But if you put your heart and soul into it, being a part of this team may be the peak experience of your professional career.

This document seeks to give you the information that will allow you to make an informed decision about whether you really want to sign up for this. Whether to join this team and follow the arduous path to exceptional organizational performance or to saunter down a comfortable trail to an easier life; this is the choice before you now. Think it through. This is one of the big decisions in your life.

What follows are some reflections about the SOMC leadership team culture and some of the commitments you will need to make to become a successful member of this team. You, like most observers, may think organizational leadership at this level is easy. And you, like most, would be wrong. If you cannot wholeheartedly embrace the commitments below, you will not survive as a member of this high-performing leadership team.

Prepare To Be Assimilated

Every new leader who joins the SOMC leadership team brings unique talents, valuable experience and strong opinions about how the team should function and what their role should be. SOMC leaders value the gifts that each new team member brings. But this team's unique culture has been forged over more than two decades. Under this team's leadership, SOMC has developed into one of the best hospitals in rural America. Your fellow leaders will expect you to passionately embrace this team's culture and to help strengthen and sustain it.

While my colleagues will always expect me to speak honestly about my perceptions and ideas, I understand that I am joining this team primarily to be assimilated into the team culture and to embrace, strengthen and sustain it, not to change it.

Embrace Patient-Centeredness

The American healthcare system is provider-centered in its current design and function. All of us have been strongly influenced by that culture. And all of us are selfish to some degree. SOMC leaders intend to change the culture of SOMC to a patient-centered organization. Not everyone agrees. Some physicians are particularly opposed to this cultural change and regularly protest that our organization should remain physician-centered instead.

I will fully support SOMC's ongoing transition to a patient-centered culture in spite of my own selfish tendencies and the heat I will take for doing so.

Focus on Results

Leaders exist to produce results. Having good intentions and ideas and talking about them will not suffice. Leaders cannot produce exceptional results by themselves. We can only achieve our goals as leaders if we can successfully persuade others to help us. It is not acceptable to ride the coattails of other leaders and their results. You must choose an important performance gap and close it.

I will achieve and sustain exceptional organizational results.

Manage Your Anger

Anger causes real problems in the workplace. You have often observed physicians and others indulge in temper tantrums when things haven't gone their way. Because such behavior is so common and so often tolerated, it is frequently viewed as mere background noise in the healthcare workplace. As an SOMC leader, you may not tolerate angry outbursts from yourself or others.

If I become angry, it will always be my fault. I will never blame someone for “making” me angry. Anger is a leadership flaw. If I act impulsively because of my anger, that is a leadership failure.

View the Best Idea as Boss

Insecure leaders often take the view that they cannot lead others successfully unless those people report to them. This is nonsense. Real leaders lead from where they are. They don't require positions or titles. They lead by example, by persuasion and by the compelling nature of their ideas. The best leaders seek to acquire influence, not power.

I acknowledge that the best idea is boss at SOMC. If I resort to “pulling rank” to lead, I will have lost all credibility as a leader.

Accept the Bell Curve

Every leader would like to work with only exceptional colleagues. That would be nice. This expectation is completely unrealistic. In every group, people distribute themselves on a Bell Curve on various dimensions—how motivated they are, how positive they are and so on. Most of the people you will lead are average people. The odds are, you are average too. We recognize average folks are critical to our success. We also understand we will never be able to turn ordinary people into stars, though they may sometime do so themselves. We further understand we must manage net-negative people appropriately.

I will lead my colleagues effectively no matter where they fall on the Bell Curve.

Abandon Your Sense of Entitlement

People with a sense of entitlement are pretty common in healthcare. They are convinced they are special and they believe they deserve special treatment. When they don't receive the deference they presume they deserve, they feel insulted and become indignant. We believe everyone is special at SOMC. No one is more special than anyone else.

I will expect no special consideration because I am a leader or for any other reason.

Manage Conflict Effectively

Conflict is a part of life and work. It is not a question of whether it will occur. It is a question of how well you will deal with it when it does. If you resolve conflicts promptly, unemotionally and transparently, your professionalism will strengthen the team and the organization. If you pout, scheme and talk behind others' backs, your effectiveness as a leader will evaporate.

I will resolve conflict promptly and professionally. In the process, I will talk to others, not about them. If I fail to do so, I expect my colleagues to confront me directly. I will provide the same service for them.

Welcome Opposition

You cannot lead effectively without creating opposition. People want to be comfortable. They do not want to change. Many will disagree with your ideas and recommendations. But opposition, while often unpleasant, plays a helpful role for leaders. It forces us to make a better case, to include others in decisions that affect them, to set priorities and to avoid impulsive decisions.

I expect to experience opposition. I expect to use it to my advantage. And I expect to persevere and succeed in spite of it.

Become an Intentional Leader

We are impulsive creatures inclined to make rash decisions based on our initial reactions. Cooler heads should prevail, but the only heads in the room are ours. That means when we are impulsively rushing to judgment, someone must remind us to lead intentionally instead of impulsively. On any given issue, that someone may need to be you.

I will lead intentionally instead of impulsively and I will encourage my colleagues to do the same.

Eschew Secrecy

Those determined to get their way, like willful children, will seek out the leader they perceive is most inclined to give them the answer they want. They will then use that answer to attempt to divide and conquer the team. This is why we have no secrets from each other, and it is the reason we usually consult with each other before making even simple decisions.

I will not keep secrets from my colleagues. I will not pledge confidentiality before I know what I am being asked to hold in confidence.

Fall into Line

We disagree often. We express our opinions freely, ask questions and consider other options. We challenge assumptions and insist on the evidence. Such conflict is good and healthy. But when the final decision is made, we are all on board. And we stay on board unless new information warrants reconsideration. As a result of this team discipline, we all lead confidently, knowing that our colleagues always have our backs.

I will speak my mind freely during team discussions, but when the decision is made, it will be my decision too. I will not undermine my fellow leaders under any circumstances.

Embrace Discomfort

All human beings long for comfort. But becoming comfortable is a mortal threat to the success of the high-performing leadership team. For this reason, we embrace discomfort. We expect to make ourselves and each other uncomfortable on a daily basis. This is a critical team discipline. And we expect to create an energizing discomfort throughout the organization.

I will embrace and create an energizing discomfort.

Be Creative

Here is another inconvenient truth: there is no formula for sustained success. Often, there is no best practice or an evidence-based process to follow. There is a problem, and we must figure out a solution for ourselves. But being creative does not come naturally to everyone. It requires discipline and a considerable investment of mental energy. Groups are sometimes more creative than individuals; sometimes they are not.

I will design creative solutions to problems instead of settling for average performance results.

Develop Toughness

SOMC leaders must make some unpopular decisions. People don't want to change. People don't want to be told no. While we never want to make a decision impulsively or in anger, we intend to do the right thing even when it is personally painful or invites criticism from those who disagree or don't understand.

I will be tough when I need to be even when taking a stand that is unpopular or personally difficult.

Manage Your Need to Be Loved

We all have needs and we are compelled by them. One of the most powerful is the need for others to like us. This need is alive and well among SOMC leaders where it urges us to support what individuals want instead of what the organization needs.

I will recognize and govern my need to be popular.

Clarify Your Expectations

Everyone has expectations. We do not always make them clear. We may not even understand our own expectations until someone fails to meet them. The truth is, we expect others to read our minds. And they expect the same from us. This never works. When we ask others for their opinions, they automatically assume we are seeking their consent. Then, when we don't follow their advice, their feelings are hurt and they are likely to complain that we had already made up our minds. When we communicate with others, it is critical that we make it clear whether we are informing them, consulting with them or seeking their consent.

I will not be critical of anyone until I have made my expectations clear. And when I am communicating with others, I will clarify whether I am informing, consulting or seeking consent.

Lead by Example

All true leaders lead first by example. They practice what they preach. This means that we take safety seriously at home and at work. It means we follow evidence-based processes even when we would rather cut corners. We practice AIDET+C. We are unfailingly gracious to everyone even when they hate our guts. We strive to be good stewards of the community's resources. We doggedly pursue health and fitness lifestyles even if we hate exercise. And we will expect you to do the same.

I will lead by example and I will invite others to hold me accountable for doing so.

Ask and Invite Hard Questions

We believe it is our duty to ask hard questions, and we expect others to ask us hard questions in return. It's much easier to just go with the flow. It's not just that SOMC leaders are hesitant; coming up with the right questions is hard work. But it is work that must be done every day if we are going to improve. And we intend to improve.

I will strive to ask the right questions even when they make others uncomfortable, and I will expect others to return the favor.

Add Value

We are committed to fielding the best possible SOMC leadership team. Given that commitment, the privilege of remaining a member of this team is entirely dependent on the contributions you make to the team and the organization. If those you serve conclude that you don't add value to the team, or if they conclude that some other leader would bring more value, you will be replaced.

I am committed to bringing real value to this team and to SOMC. If, at any time, my colleagues conclude they could successfully "trade up," I will leave the team.