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# On Being Successful At SOMC

Some Practical Guidelines For New Physicians

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Welcome to our SOMC family! You bring invaluable gifts to our organization and to the Portsmouth community. We are grateful that you have chosen to work and serve here. You bring advanced medical training that will stimulate your colleagues and benefit your patients, and your new ideas will challenge us to consider improved ways of doing things. Your skill will give suffering persons hope, and your community involvement will encourage others to pitch in. Most importantly, you will have questions. As a newcomer, your willingness to question the status quo is one of your most valuable gifts. Please share your questions with us.

We want you to be successful here. That is the point of this essay. We have collected some practical guidelines that—if followed—will greatly increase that likelihood of your success. While we are confident that we have identified some of the keys to a successful transition, we have certainly not cornered the market. We encourage you to seek out other innovative strategies. You will find outstanding leaders at every level of our organization. Observe them. Engage them. Learn from them.

Most of the physicians who move to Portsmouth end up spending their entire careers here. We want you to eventually look back on your decision to join the SOMC medical staff as one of the best decisions of your life. You have already discovered that many physicians are unhappy with how their careers and their lives have turned out. We don't want you to be one of those physicians. We are convinced that embracing the principles outlined in this essay will ensure your success here and enhance the overall quality of your life. We decided to write this essay because we would have welcomed such a document had it had been available when we came. Let us know what you think.

## Identify your values.

Your success in Portsmouth and your satisfaction with your life will ultimately depend on your values and whether you have conformed your life to them. While moving to a new community and amid the chaos of starting a new practice may not be the most convenient time to clarify your personal values, this is the most important step you can take to ensure your success here. You will want to identify your values carefully since they will become the foundations for how you set priorities, manage your time and conduct your life.

Excellence. Service. Teamwork. These are some of the values that most successful physicians at SOMC endorse and embrace. Once you have identified the basic values you want to guide your life, you are ready to establish your priorities and share them with others. When others know your core values and understand your priorities,

opportunities for misunderstanding are avoided, common ground is established and collaboration in the pursuit of common goals is easier to achieve.

## Strive for clinical excellence.

Clinical excellence is critical to your success at SOMC. Even if you are widely perceived as a nice person, you will not be taken seriously if you are not viewed as an excellent clinician. If you are primarily in this for the money and you cut corners to make another buck, your colleagues will figure this out and dismiss you as a serious player. Those who plod through their days with no real passion for medicine or genuine concern for their patients may reach their financial goals, but they will miss the unspeakable joy and deep satisfaction that only a visceral commitment to excellence brings.

Excellent clinicians do whatever it takes to get the job done right. They set high standards for themselves, hold themselves accountable and refuse to blame others when things go wrong. Physician stars believe they are responsible for the patients in their charge. They are curious and flexible, eagerly soliciting input from other members of the team. These leaders learn continuously and jump at every opportunity to teach others. They are available and they see their tasks through. If these leaders say they will do something, you can take their word to the bank. Outstanding clinicians know that such a reputation takes time and that respect is earned. Credentials only give us the right to prove ourselves; they don't confer esteem.

## Strive for service excellence.

Most of the people you serve in your work won't appreciate your technical skill or your cognitive brilliance, but they will know whether you have a service heart. Expectations for customer service excellence are increasing and patients and colleagues are no longer tolerating shoddy service by physicians. Increasingly, we all have a choice. And we are buying excellent service. There are a number of practical things you can do to enhance your reputation as a customer service star. Make eye contact with people and greet them with a smile. Do you think this practical advice is too basic? Watch the number of your physician colleagues who stalk down the hall ignoring the "little people." Distribute satisfaction surveys to your patients and take their responses seriously. Review selected customer service literature and pay attention to the ways acknowledged service stars interact with the investments you can make that will pay the dividends a commitment to service will return.

## Work Hard.

The physicians in Portsmouth have adopted a strong work ethic and perceived slackers are frowned upon. Most physicians here still conduct solo or small group private practices and take pride in their independence, productivity and consistent availability. While most senior physicians are refusing to permit the practice of medicine to consume their entire lives and that setting personal and family priorities is a good thing, admiration for those with a strong work ethic persists.

Finding the right balance between our work and the other priorities in our lives is a challenge for everyone. Here are some ways to enhance your credibility while limiting your hours. Make it clear when you will be able and then deliver on that commitment. Don't boast about all the time you take off or whine continuously about how you hate being in the hospital or office. When another physician calls you personally to ask for help, be careful about saying "no." Your willingness to respond cheerfully in the time of a colleague's need is an emotional bank deposit that you'll be glad you made when you need to make a withdrawal yourself later on.

## Grow a thick skin.

Portsmouth is a small town. Doctors are relative celebrities here. You will need to prepare yourself for life in a sort of fishbowl. Everything you say or do will be heard or seen by someone who knows who you are, and people here enjoy talking about such things. In spite of your best efforts, you will not always please everyone and you can expect some criticism. If you permit the background gossip or the predictable backbiting to get to you, irritation will consume a lot of emotional energy. Life is too short to spend time being frustrated.

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Insofar as possible, strive to be unfailingly gracious to everyone all the time. Conduct yourself as the role model you are. Dress professionally and don't lose your temper in public. Think before you react. Hold yourself accountable, conduct yourself honestly, and be careful of offering unsolicited advice. Be slow to criticize and quick to compliment. When you know you have conducted yourself honorably, ignore the background carping that is part of all of our everyday lives.

## Get involved in the community.

There are endless opportunities to get involved in community activities and you will want to pursue this for a number of reasons. Community involvement is one of the joys of living in a small town, and your reputation as a physician will be enhanced when others get to know you outside your professional role. Because the needs are great and additional volunteers are always needed, your willingness to participate will be deeply appreciated by the other movers and shakers in our community.

Given all these opportunities, many physicians overextend themselves at first. When you fail to deliver on some commitment, your credibility will take a nosedive. Since you don't want this to happen, you will want to be cautious about your early commitments. In deciding what to get involved in, your core values will serve as your best guides.

## Abandon arrogance as a defense.

Arrogance is one of the most common complaints people have about physicians. It is the sort of thing we all recognize in others but fail to see in ourselves. Arrogance is usually the result of some sense of entitlement—the notion that we deserve some special consideration because of our superior rank, extensive knowledge or unusual skill. It is always a psychological defense against the secret fear that we are not really that special after all.

If you find yourself feeling resentful that you were not accorded some special consideration, due respect or preferential treatment, then you've got the arrogance problem.

Here are some things you can do to overcome it. Face the problem and stop denying that you are arrogant. If others perceive you as arrogant, then you are. Stop demanding special consideration. Stop introducing yourself as Doctor. Ask people politely instead of demanding. Admit your mistakes. Ask for help. Take responsibility for your own actions and stop making excuses and blaming others. Stop talking down to others. Really get to know the other members of the healthcare team who help you get the work done and let them know that you genuinely appreciate their efforts. Involve them in their questions. Be nice. Be kind.

## Learn to disagree agreeably.

Conflict is inevitable. It causes a lot of pain and aggravation in most organizations. We humans are a pretty sensitive lot, and you will not infrequently discover that you have somehow offended others even though you never meant to. Because of your rank, and perceived status and power, even your off-hand remarks will pack an emotional wallop beyond your comprehension. Taking a thoughtful position on the important issues that arise will mean that you will have to disagree with your colleagues at least sometimes. If managed properly though, conflict can be very positive for you, your colleagues and the organization.

Here are some special ways to minimize destructive conflict and maximize constructive conflict. Take the time to listen to both sides before you weigh in. Remind yourself that proponents of a particular view are often “spinning” the facts to increase the likelihood of a favorable reception. Ask for the data. We all tend to feel most strongly when we really don’t know what we are talking about. Ask clarifying questions instead of attacking the issue head on. Focus on the issue and not the person making the case. Make a note of any contaminating emotional arousal, and discount the issue’s impact accordingly. Finally, take tentative positions based on the current evidence, but make it clear to everyone involved that you are willing to reconsider if new information emerges.

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## Take the initiative.

There are all kinds of problems in the world, and there are still a few at SOMC. You have doubtless observed that—when faced with some issue or problem—most of us are inclined to bemoan this ridiculous state of affairs and lament the fact that the people in charge won’t do something about it. On a more personal level, when physicians get frustrated with each other, they are much more inclined to talk about each other than to talk to each other.

You will enjoy more professional success and personal happiness if you will take the initiative when you decide that something needs to be done. Ruminating about some annoying issue is painful and counterproductive. If you see an organizational process that is flawed, find some responsible leader and offer to help fix it. Introduce yourself to everyone and begin building your own

network. If you have a conflict with another colleague, confront him or her good-naturedly and in private. Now, don’t be unrealistic. No matter how appropriately you conduct yourself, things won’t always work out. But by taking the initiative, you will greatly increase your odds of success and limit your own pointless rumination time.

## Be patient and persistent.

Physicians are not known for being particularly patient. At our core we are patient advocates, and we feel strongly that health care systems should support us in our mission to see that our patients get what we think they need. Most of us care for patients in the context of a one-on-one relationship that encourages the illusion of control. In other words, we physicians think we are in charge and in control. Coming to terms with our relative ineffectiveness is hard.

But physicians can and do make an enormous difference. It just takes more time and energy than we would wish. Every physician would like to make one call to the CEO, tell him or her what needs to be done and have it happen right now. Here’s how it really works. Credible physician leaders identify key stakeholders and study the problem. With the coalition for change they have organized, they repeatedly make a compelling case for what needs to be done until they have convinced the powers that be. They then bird dog the implementation process until the goal is achieved. This process requires patience and persistence, but the satisfaction of realizing significant organization change is most rewarding.

## Communicate effectively.

How effectively do you believe your colleagues communicate with you? You probably don’t do much better. How often have you shaken your head in frustration when trying to communicate successfully with your patients? Patients consistently rate their physicians as poor communicators. The truth is everybody is talking and very few of us are really communicating.

Here are some strategies that will make you more effective. Talk less. When you do finally speak up others will pay more attention. Repeat yourself a lot. Most of us don’t get things the first time around. Ask questions instead of making statements. This increases the possibility that the other person will conclude that the idea that bubbles up was his or hers. Figure out the best way to communicate with the person that you are trying to reach. Here’s a clue. What is that person’s favorite mode of communication? If that person tends

to use email, he will likely respond best to email—not to a face-to-face encounter. And keep practicing. All of us spend our entire lives trying to get this right. The best we can hope for is that we will improve over time.

## Be Generous.

This does not mean just giving money away, although you ought to do some of that too. This guideline refers to the desirability of having a generous heart. You will come across some of your colleagues who are difficult to live and work with, but everyone loves them. It's because that underneath all that cranky crust beats a big heart. You will see other capable but trying physicians that do not have a friend in the world. They are outcasts because they are perceived to have hearts of stone.

Here are some ways to grow a bigger heart. Invest time and genuine interest in others. Take time to listen and understand. Stop talking about yourself. People aren't nearly as interested as you think anyway. Go out of your way to ask about a sick family member or to offer a word of encouragement when you see that your colleague is down. If you try to use kindness as a mere technique, people will see it for what it is and they won't like it.

## Be open to change.

Everybody loves to talk about the inevitability of change, the rapidity of change and the fact that we must embrace it if we are to be successful. All this talk notwithstanding, the only change any of us is eager to embrace is that change that appears to benefit us personally. And as you know, change is not always good and sometimes it should be resisted. In any health care organization, physicians are key opinion leaders both in facilitating and resisting change. This is why your approach to change is so critical to your personal contentment and SOMC's success. You will propose some change yourself. Other changes will be proposed to you in the hope that you will support the new idea. External forces over which you have little or no control will force other change on you. What are some practical approaches for coping successfully with all of this change?

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If you decide to propose some change yourself, figure out who will be affected by it and show them how what you

are proposing is really in their best interest. This is the most effective way to accomplish organizational change relatively painlessly. This approach is unfortunately the exception rather than the rule. If someone approaches you with a proposal, insist that they make a compelling case. Physicians serve those around them best by not hesitating to ask the hard questions. If some change is about to be imposed by external forces, take time to identify all of the options available to you. Pick the best option and implement it. Then move on and don't spend the rest of your life ruining the day that this or that bad thing happened. Many fine physicians have spent the best years of their lives resenting some change that occurred 25 years ago. What a shame.

## Focus on the common ground.

It is easy to focus on the differences between us. Many of your colleagues will adopt different perspectives on the issues that arise, and some of them will feel so strongly about their views that they will insist that you agree with them. You will come across many attitudes and behaviors you find repugnant, and you will be tempted to write these people off. That is almost always a mistake. Take time to mentally catalog others' strengths and weaknesses. We all have some of both.

Finding a way to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of those around you is the essential skill that will permit you to build teams. Teamwork is the only way you can achieve your clinical and organizational objectives. While you are doing this, pay particular attention to those things you have in common with your most difficult colleagues. This common ground will become the foundation of whatever relationship you will eventually be able to build and sustain. Also, remind yourself to focus on the positive attributes of others. When you do this, you will find yourself feeling more positive about them.

## Become an effective team player.

Physicians are usually not team players by nature. We have typically been trained to take the ultimate responsibility for what happens to our patients, and we enjoy thinking of ourselves as "captains of the ship." The problem with that mentality is that most of what we need to get done in our professional lives can only be accomplished through teamwork. The truth is, effective team leaders are first effective team members. If you focus on learning to be an

effective team player, the opportunity to lead will follow naturally. If you start out trying to force your leadership on others, they may appear to go along but their hearts won't be in it. And that will be clear by the mediocre results the team produces. Look for a good team to join. Observe and learn from the best team players at SOMC. Read about teamwork and don't fall into the common trap of assuming that because you know a lot about medicine you know everything you need to know about interpersonal dynamics and organizational psychology as well.

## Resist the temptation to gossip.

Let's face it. We all love gossip—unless it's about us. Hospital gossip is among the juiciest in the world. We all want to be in the information loop, and almost everyone takes pleasure in being able to tell others something they don't already know and luxuriate in their rapt attention during the telling. Gossip is the emotional garlic in our relationships with others. It enhances the flavor of social intercourse at first, but the aftertaste makes you question whether indulging was worth it.

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If you don't show enthusiasm for gossip's morsel, he or she will seek another mouth to feed. Asking questions will also take the joy out of gossip mongering. "What have you done about this issue yourself?" "Do you know for a fact that this is true?" "What do you want me to do about this?" You get the picture.

## Seek out positive people.

The sad truth is that the world is heavily populated with negative people. We even have a few in Portsmouth. These are the folk who grunt when you say, "Good Morning," and delight in pointing out what is wrong with the world. They are annoyed by positive, upbeat folk and they are on a mission to inform others about how miserable the current situation really is. If you spend much time around these malcontents, they will definitely bring you down.

The quality of your professional life here will be a reflection of the attitudes of those you spend time with. When you find yourself in a roomful of bellyachers, think of something else that you need to do. Don't waste time and energy trying to convince

these incorrigibles that things are not as bad as they think; they've been practicing the religion of cynicism for years, and they are always looking for another convert. Instead, find the positive people and spend time with them. It's easy to identify these organizational treasures. They are the ones that make you feel better just for having bumped into them.

## Find your niche.

You bring unique interests, talents and passions with you. These are the things you want to be "known for." Portsmouth offers almost limitless opportunities to advance these interests in the context of a life lived fully and a career pursued joyfully.

After you have settled in for a bit, look around for the opportunity to develop your own special niche here. Find others who share these interests and organize a group. Begin a lecture series. Take time off to perform community service or to go on a missionary trip. Become an expert bird watcher or part-time farmer. Collect antique marbles or join our local group of model railroaders. Don't let work consume your life. What you do is important, but it's not as important as who you are.

## Become a mentor.

Think about those who have mentored you in your career so far. They have inspired you, challenged you to stick with it when you were ready to quit and shared the practical wisdom that you can't find in a book. They helped you to see what really mattered and enabled you to throw some baggage overboard that might have sunk your ship.

One of the greatest satisfactions you will ever know is mentoring another colleague. You never know when this opportunity will arise. But you will want to be available when it does. You really can't advertise your services as a mentor; you have to get picked. If you don't have a generous heart and an approachable manner, you are likely to get passed over. Missing this opportunity is one of the tragedies of life.

## Give yourself a break.

If you weren't a high achiever, you wouldn't be here. If you weren't responsible, you wouldn't be a good physician. If you didn't hold yourself accountable, your patients couldn't trust you. And if you don't give yourself a break now and then, you're going to burn out and be miserable during the last half of your career.

You are going to make some pretty serious mistakes in your career. Some of us have a hard time admitting those, and those physicians frighten everybody around them. You won't do your best work during your first year here in Portsmouth. You will be feeling your way along and it will take a while to find the best ways to get things done. You know a great deal, but you still have a lot to learn. Not knowing what you don't know is the worst part of the transition to a new community.

**Ask for help. Laugh at yourself. Admit that you messed up. Stop beating yourself up. Promise yourself that you'll do better next time.**

The only way to cope successfully with your first year here is to give yourself some breaks. Ask for help. Laugh at yourself. Admit that you messed up. Stop beating yourself up. Promise yourself that you'll do better next time. And remind yourself that clinical excellence is a lifelong journey, not a destination.

## Conclusion

It is relatively difficult to recruit physicians and their families to a rural area. Physicians who are committed to clinical excellence and exceptional service are treasured wherever they are, but they are particularly precious community assets in Portsmouth. We have chosen to practice here because of our intention to make a difference in a community that physicians don't ordinarily flock to. We passionately believe that the people of this community deserve the same high quality medical care as those who live in wealthy resort communities or major cities. We are grateful that you have chosen to join us in this mission.

This essay is our way of extending our hands to you – a new and valued colleague. These are not the only keys to success, but these guidelines point in the right direction. If you have any questions about any of the points we have raised, any of us would be honored to discuss these or any other issues with you. We really want you and your family to be happy and successful here. Thank you again for electing to work and serve with us.

## About the Author

Dr. Stewart is the Vice President for Medical Affairs and the Chief Medical Officer of Southern Ohio Medical Center, and the Chairman and CEO of the SOMC Medical Care Foundation, Inc., a multi-specialty physician practice group, in Portsmouth, Ohio. Dr. Stewart is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine, and he also still practices adult psychiatry part-time.

Dr. Stewart was born and raised in Rome, Georgia. He graduated from Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia and received his MD from the Medical College of Georgia. He completed his psychiatric residency at the Medical College of Georgia and then served as Chief of the Mental Health Clinic at the US Air Force Hospital near Rapid City, South Dakota. He opened his private practice in Portsmouth in 1981. He returned to graduate school and earned an MBA from Ohio University in 1999.

Dr. Stewart is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and a Distinguished Lifetime Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He is a past president of the Ohio Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Stewart is a former Chairman of The Ohio Partnership for Excellence. He also served as a member of the Board of Examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Dr. Stewart is the senior author of, "A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders," a book published by SOMCPress in 2003. He and his wife, Fay, have two grown sons.

