

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

## Advancing Your Career

Ann Nattinger, MD, MPH

*Most of us expect to be innovative with our areas of scholarship, but I would argue it is best to introduce innovation into every aspect of our work, including administrative or committee service.*



I have been in academic medicine for a couple of decades now and have been a division chief for more than 10 years. In that time, I have observed some strategies that I think help advance one's career. Without pretending that I have always done everything optimally, I offer these general thoughts about career advancement.

*Develop a clear vision for each phase of your career, and be sure it is aligned with the organization's priorities.* Most of us go through phases in our careers. For example, we may be clinician-teachers at one time, associate program directors or directors of medical student education at another time, and perhaps take an advanced leadership role later in our careers. At each phase, it is important to have a clear sense of what we wish to accomplish. Maintaining the status quo is rarely a good idea, but when we develop our vision for our role, we should be aware of the institution's strategic priorities. If you have a great idea for a laboratory to advance scholarship in medical education, but the institution is working on developing the cancer center, then you may feel like you are up against a brick wall. One may need to scale back or re-orient one's vision to fit the institution. (Can you study medical education related to cancer, for example?) Hopefully this is discerned prior to taking on a new responsibility, and it is related to the idea of a "good fit" for people and positions.

*It's OK to bring forward problems, but do so in the context of potential solutions.* Most of our divisions, departments, and medical

schools have faculty meetings or other venues for critical faculty discussions. Leaders at these meetings tend to hear a lot of complaints, and most of these externalize the problem outside of the person or group affected. For example, you may feel that your productivity in clinic is diminished due to a lack of resources provided by the hospital. A natural response of the department chair may be to question whether the resources are being used optimally. If you decide to bring this problem forward, have some potential solutions in mind that are not all dependent on doubling your clinic's budget. Perhaps you acknowledge the possibility that the resources are not optimally utilized, for example, and propose comparing to external benchmarks. If you decide to raise the problem, you should be prepared to devote some of your own time to developing the solutions.

*Try to introduce innovation into every responsibility you take on.* Most of us expect to be innovative with our areas of scholarship, but I would argue it is best to introduce innovation into every aspect of our work, including administrative or committee service. Avoid doing things the same way just because they have always been done that way. Perhaps this is another way of saying to think "outside the box." Studies indicate that creative people address problems by letting their minds wander, allowing free association.<sup>1</sup> This gives rise to innovative "outside the box" ideas. This type of thinking takes some time free from the usual hustle and bustle of the day. In academic settings, creativity is

typically valued, and being known as a person with innovative ideas (even if they pertain to the library committee) will generally help your career.

*Keep your commitments.* It is critical to think seriously before taking on new commitments. Some faculty have not learned how to politely and tactfully decline certain opportunities and so become over-committed. What typically follows is an inability to perform some—or worse, all—of one's commitments at or above the expected standard. Be sure that you agree to commitments that you can accomplish and that you can take some gratification in accomplishing them well. You do not want to get a reputation for rarely showing up at meetings, for failing to bring the piece you said you would write, and so on. I realize that it can be difficult at times to discern whether a given opportunity should be accepted or declined, and you may need to seek advice. But if you agree to take on a commitment, you should do it well.

*Keep your cool.* No matter how good the institution or how good your position's fit, things will inevitably go wrong in the course of a career. Someone will fail to keep their commitment to you, have selective memory about the commitment, or otherwise pull the rug out from under you. At these times, it is important not to overreact—at least in the short term. I think there is a skill from raising teenagers that applies here. You may need to express disappointment and have a difficult conversation. Maybe you will even decide to leave the institution. But don't do any of these while you are

continued on page 2

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

continued from page 1

in the immediate period of feeling angry or hurt. Losing your temper can be the one thing people remember about you and can harm your ability to influence others. You might need to say you will think about the issue in order to give yourself the needed time to decide (perhaps with advice from a mentor) on the best response. By the time you deliver the response you should be cool and reasoned.

*Continue to seek training as your career progresses.* Those of us who are clinicians expect to obtain continued clinical training over time, but career development applies to other aspects of your professional life as well. While we can often develop ourselves by observing role models and others at our institutions, it is very useful to gain outside perspectives, whether on new ways of organizing medical education, new methods for research, or leadership training. While general internal medicine faculty typically feel very busy, it is important to take some time during your career to learn about new perspectives and ways of doing things. Many of our members attend the SGIM annual meeting regularly, but I hope that our members will reg-

ularly attend sessions that are out of their comfort zone. Even if these do not result in immediate changes in your life, the broadening experience will likely help you at some point.

*Have fun—at least most days!* You have worked hard to get here. No one has a great day every day, but you should feel happy to come to work most of the time. If not, you should meet with your mentors, figure out what is wrong, and problem-solve to fix it. One of the many wonderful things about a career in GIM is that there are so many potential career paths. If one pathway isn't working, chances are another will. Sometimes we feel locked into a pathway that we started for whatever reason, but it doesn't need to be that way. I have seen people change into and out of research, education, and administration. It may take strategic planning over some months, but don't be afraid to make a change if you sense that is what you need.

This is my last SGIM *Forum* column as president of SGIM. Before I sign off, let me say how fortunate we are as a Society to have such a wonderful staff. Our SGIM staff members interact with members

mostly by phone and e-mail, except at our national conference and a few key meetings that happen throughout the year. It is amazing how engaged they are on our behalf. We are a very participatory Society, which means that our staff stay busy helping to support our various groups (e.g. Council, committees, and task forces); managing our publications, communications, awards, and elections; helping us secure grants; supporting our national and regional meetings as well as special events like the Academic Hospitalist Academy; managing our finances and records; and helping us work cooperatively with other organizations to leverage our influence. Having been privileged to work closely with our staff this year, I am proud of the work they do, and I hope that our members are as well.

I remain so grateful to the SGIM members for giving me this outstanding opportunity to serve our Society as president!

### Reference

1. Pringle H. The origins of creativity. *Scientific American* 2013; 308:37-43.

SGIM