

The Leadership Forum

Words of Wisdom Leading

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My family likes to ride bikes on the Old Plank Road Trail, south of Chicago. On weekends, all kinds of folks enjoy the trail—younger cyclists, walkers and joggers, families with strollers, people with dogs on leashes. The cyclist in the lead has to watch carefully, exercise good judgment and communicate well, both to others on the trail and to the rest of the cycling party, in order to keep everyone safe. But that's not the leader's only job. The leader sets the pace—fast enough for a good workout, but sustainable for everyone who's on the ride. It's physically hard to be the leader—cyclists who follow expend about thirty percent less effort when they tuck in close and aerodynamically 'draft' the leader.

Leading in academic medicine shares many characteristics with leading on the bike path. We share the road with all kinds of folks—patients, students, hospital administrators, payers, policy-makers—and we need to understand their varied interests and perspectives. It's also our job to scout out what's up ahead—what will the Affordable Care Act mean for primary care practices and academic health centers over the next three years? How should this understanding influence our health center's strategic planning? We have to communicate constantly—what do our neighbors and our partners in the healthcare system need to hear from us about what we're up to these days? And how can we bring along

faculty, staff and learners, to keep them abreast of changes?

Sometimes in healthcare, we don't get to set the pace. Through anticipating and preparing for possible change scenarios, we can usually help constituents adapt to changes at a pace that's challenging but tolerable, stimulating individual and organizational development in a changing environment. And deepening our leadership bench is important—an effective leadership team can share responsibilities in a way that's more sustainable in the long run, and moves the group farther and faster overall.

Next time you're out biking or hiking take turns leading—and see how much you learn!