Thrivecast Episode 32: Guidance for Sponsoring URMS Colleagues

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Dr. Ben Humphreys. Dr. Humphreys is the Joseph Friedman Professor of renal diseases in medicine and Chief of the Division of Nephrology at Washington University in St. Louis. We often refer to that as the other Washington University or University of Washington. He is an accomplished physician scientist whose work focuses on precision and regenerative medicine and kidney diseases, and that's not why I invited him here today. I invited him here today because I had the pleasure of listening to Ben talk at a recent UW School of Medicine Women's Leadership Series, and your talk was about how to build and lead diverse teams.

And actually the part that I wanted to invite you to talk with us about more [00:01:00] was the reflections you had about sponsorship and helping promote the careers of folks who are underrepresented in medicine. So I thought that it would be, I really enjoyed listening to you speak about this, and I thought it would be a really good conversation.

So thanks for joining to talk about that.

Ben Humphreys: Thank you so much, Trish. It's really a privilege to be with you today on the podcast, and I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Trish Kritek: Wonderful. Ben, I thought we might start off by talking about one of the things you highlight and we've talked about on Thrivecast before, but I think it's worth going over again, is this contrast between sponsorship and mentoring or mentorship.

And maybe you could talk a little bit about the opportunities for sponsorship and kind of how that differs.

Ben Humphreys: That's a great question and I think a really easy to understand analogy is the remake of A Star is Born when Bradley Cooper discovers Lady Gaga in a bar and discovers that like she's really talented, but the powers that be in the music industry have decided that she doesn't have the the [00:02:00] right look.

And so she's stuck singing in a bar. And then the next night he invites her on stage with him to sing a song that she had written shallow. And of course, you know, a star was born and so literally, I mean, that is sponsorship, right? That Bradley Cooper has a wide audience. He's powerful. And he shared it with Lady Gaga to promote her career.

I think that's like a non-academic medicine example of sponsorship. But it really gets to the heart of the difference. And, you know, don't get me wrong, I speak a lot about mentorship. It's incredibly important. But I think the difference is that a mentor is someone who will

share their knowledge and time with you. But a sponsor is someone who has power and will use it for you. And, mentorship is, you know, in a sense, you know, limited only by time, but sponsorship is actually truly limited by one's political capital. [00:03:00]

Trish Kritek: That's a, I think a real, first of all, that's the first time A Star is Born has been referenced on Thrivecast.

So thank you for that. But in there is a really nice definition and I really appreciate it as an analogy. And then that follow up of like, it's about using your power and your privilege to open doors, bring someone on the stage, whatever it is. And I think that that's, I think, a central difference between what mentorship is.

Mentors can be sponsors, but I think there's a distinct set of skills. And that leads me to my second question, which is, how can we help leaders think about being an effective sponsor? So like, what's your guidance in that?

Ben Humphreys: Well, I think there are several ways. I think there are some personal ways, and then I think there are some professional and outward facing ways.

The first is particularly as a white male leader, as it's really critical to recognize your implicit bias and that people gravitate towards people that look like them. [00:04:00] And this could lead to proteges, you know, looking like other white male sponsors. And so, you know, we have to really work to sort of unlearn some of these practices and to be very intentional about the folks that we try to sponsor.

Johnson and Smith in this book that I'm sure you're familiar with, Athena Rising, report on research that men find a mentor more easily than women, and the mentoring experience benefits men more than women and you know, if used the wrong way, sort of mentorship and sponsorship could actually reproduce or exacerbate gender inequalities.

And so I think that's the first thing is really just to recognize the systems that are in place that, that may unconsciously exacerbate inequalities. But more broadly, Herminia Ibarra is at the London Business School and she has this really nice framework to think about the mentorship to sponsor spectrum.

[00:05:00] And I really like it, so I'll just share it. It's, you know, on the mentorship side of things, a mentor provides advice, support, coaching, all the things that we're familiar with. But as we move degree by degree towards full sponsorship, we get, you know, to a strategizer, someone who shares strategic information about, for example, the division or department's culture, or, you know, power players or ways to strategize about advancing your mentees or career. You know, the next step is a connector. This is getting a little bit more public. You're making introductions to influential people.

You're talking her or him up to powerful people who have influence, the the opportunity. The, then the next step beyond that is the opportunity giver and here, this is when you're

invited to give a high profile talk and you say, I'm not available. But I highly recommend this person that you may not have heard of who is a woman or underrepresented minority who could really benefit from that [00:06:00] public exposure thing.

Lady Gaga. And then finally, and this is I think, super important. Again, for people like me, white men in leadership positions is to be an advocate, and that's to publicly advocate for a promotion or a position of power. That's where you're really burning your political capital. But also I think engaging publicly in conversations around equity and inclusion in the workplace.

And that's something, you know, we can talk more about it, that I've really come to believe is a responsibility in particular of leaders and but especially white male leaders.

Trish Kritek: So there's a lot there. So I'm gonna kind of dig into a couple places, but I definitely wanna come back to the last part about being an advocate.

I think the first one, the strategy part is something I haven't heard people talk about a lot more. And to me that sounds a little bit about like explaining what's behind the curtain, which is kind of secret to a lot of us. And more so if like you didn't grow up in academic medicine or with parents who open these doors or with colleagues who you've known for years.

And so I like [00:07:00] that and maybe that is a part of demystifying the spaces that we work in, which I think is helpful. I think we think more about the connector and the opportunity giver. And I'm wondering if you could, before we get to the advocacy part, maybe talk about how you've done that in your career.

Because sometimes I feel like people use that as like, I gotta ask to do this thing that I don't really wanna do. So I'm gonna give it as a quote unquote, opportunity to someone. And yet I don't know that that always is really what we wanna do. So maybe you could talk a little bit about that space of connector and opportunity provider.

Ben Humphreys: Right. That's a great point. That it needs to be opportunity worth taking. Right. We talk a lot about the importance of saying no, and if you're a sponsor, by definition, you have influence and you may think that you're trying to raise someone up by giving them this opportunity. But what if it's one of these tasks that does not go on on your [00:08:00] CV or that doesn't support promotion?

So I think you raised a really good point. Here are some of the ways that I've tried to address this. They're maybe not directly answering your question, but I think one of the ways that respect is given and received in an academic division is through accolade, public accolades. And I think there's research too that folks really need and want to feel recognized and valued by their institutions that they're working so hard and in particular that women and underrepresented in medicine and science faculty, you know, need that type of recognition the same as anyone. And yet again of coming back to implicit bias. If we're not intentional

about who we're, how we're deciding how these accolades are given, I think we can run into trouble. So there, there's a nice paper that from the Brigham Maria Yialamas and some folks that you and I both know.

Yeah. And it was titled Making the Voices of Female Trainees Heard. And it was so interesting because Joel Katz, who was the former program director, now Maria is the program director, [00:09:00] you know, is very good about accolades and is a very generative mentor. But some of the female trainees of which made up 50% of the residency, pointed out that when he sent out emails celebrating someone's article, they were mostly male.

And you know, it's not nothing, you know, anybody that knows Joel knows it, it would never be intentional. But they all went and sort of did a systems analysis, like how did this happen? Well, it turned out, and you won't be surprised that the men are better at self-promotion. And so they're the ones who sent an email.

Or when Joel's bumped into them in the hall and said, what's going on? Oh, I just had a paper published. And so you know the solution. They came up with a really nice solution, which was to be much more intentional about having a framework. They would do a PubMed search, you know, of all of their trainees every month.

And they would actively seek these kinds of, accomplishments and then publicize them. And once they did this, of course it all evened out. And so I think that is just an example of how to try to, a small way of trying to put it into action. You know, I [00:10:00] think one other thing that I've tried to do is act on the notion that our future leaders are right in front of us.

But that they don't always get the training or recognition that they need to sort of see themselves in that future role here. Here's an example at at Wash U at my institution chair. When a faculty member becomes a chair, whether internal or external, they automatically get leadership coaching.

There's a whole industry of leadership coaching, mostly in business, but a little bit more now in academic medicine. Well, I mean, I asked why did chairs need leadership coaching? I mean, they already got the big job, right? Why wouldn't we give this to junior promising women and underrepresented minority future leaders so that they could see themselves in the role?

So I, I think these are some of the ways to try and operationalize that.

Trish Kritek: Okay, so, so much there. So, first of all, wanna call out to Maria Yialamas in that paper. It's a great paper and I'm gonna encourage people to take a look at it cuz it was like shining a light on your own local [00:11:00] practices and then coming with solutions to be more equitable in the calling out of people's accomplishments, which I very much love.

And I think that that's a really nice study of an intentional practice to mitigate our implicit biases, which I think is what you're talking about a lot, which I really like. I think the other thing is, you're playing into my hand on this one. I a hundred percent agree with you that the coaching that we need to do is for people who are rising leaders and not leaders.

I think the reality is lots of people end up in leadership roles never having gotten the training, and so they probably need it too. But let's start with the people who are, who are rising leaders, and I'm a hundred percent in agreement with you and I think we have to again, be intentional and strategic in, in those things.

I think all of those are, are kind of speaking to actually some of the advocacy that you were talking about. Are there other aspects of advocacy that you think are really important for us to think about as leaders as we enter into these spaces?

Ben Humphreys: I think that it's [00:12:00] really important to listen. And, you know, and again, my lived experience is being a white male leader.

And so I don't have any lived experience of being a woman or underrepresented minority faculty member. And so I think that's one of the most important and powerful things that I can do is to listen and then to even actively solicit experiences. Well, how are things going for you in the division and what could be better and what are the, what are the pain points?

And then that allows one to strategize on how better to advocate. I think that faculty development. Really has a lot to do with advocating. One of the things that I, one of the best aspects of my job is nominating my faculty and some of our trainees for awards at the departmental and institutional level, and even in national organizations.

Because they're all super deserving, but view that as my job is to sort of [00:13:00] promote them on these stages and to do so to promote everybody, right? Especially the people who may not have been promoted as much in, you know, the prior administration, for example. So those are just a few ways that I think about it.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate the nomination thing. I also, as I have risen in my leadership roles, have found that a really joyous part of my job is to actually write those letters. I'm not gonna lie, they take time and I have to block out some time to actually write them. But once I write them, it's actually incredibly inspiring to me to kind of craft this story of these people that I'm really proud of, that I work with.

So I think it's actually a really good practice that when those emails pop up my first reaction is like, oh my gosh, do I have the time to write this? But my second reaction is, it's gonna be actually a really positive thing for me if I can block out some time to do it. I don't know. Do you get that sense too when you, when you do it?

Ben Humphreys: Yeah.

Oh, oh, absolutely. But what I remember is when it's all said and done, it's really the best feeling. You know, it, it's the best part [00:14:00] of being in a role of influence is to be able to promote others and help their careers. Yeah. Especially as we get further along in our own careers, it's much more important, I think.

I'm sure you feel the same way than any kind of personal recognition. And so, yes, it's a lot of work, but I think it's, I just remind myself how I'll feel.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, I agree. I find that super helpful and I encourage folks to consider that practice because I think it kind of feeds on itself of kind of the good spirit.

Okay. I'm gonna shift gears for one last question because it's something that I talk about in various spaces and I heard you talk a little bit about it, and that is kind of how do we make space for the next generation of leaders? And I heard you already say, our leaders are right in front of us.

Maybe they don't look quote unquote exactly like all the leaders we've had before in terms of their experience or where they come from or where they do their research in, or whether they do research or whatever those questions are. I also think , one of the challenges is we have people in those leadership roles sometimes for a really long time.

So I'm curious your thoughts on term [00:15:00] limits or, you know, intentional strategies to, to bring in the next generation of leaders.

Ben Humphreys: Yes, I have thought about this and in general, let me say, I support the concept of term limits broadly, and I think there are some caveats in academic medicine in particular, but let's just agree that you know, long-term leaders, you know, may likely lose energy and may not have the newest ideas.

And importantly, as you alluded, you know, may actually be impeding the growth and development of other younger people in the organization if they hold onto these leadership positions for too long. Furthermore, it's probably not good for the institution, but I don't think it's actually good for the individual either.

You know, my mom is a gardener and she had this saying when I was younger that something about you need to, you know, every plant needs to be repotted [00:16:00] every seven years to continue to grow. And I think that's true of us. And I don't, you know, we can argue about whether it's seven years or what, but I mean, we all should be repotted over time. And that doesn't mean you have to move to a new city or institution, but as you know, there's so many different roles you can take on and challenges and that's critical for our growth. So a couple more detailed thoughts. I think there are a lot of ways that you can approach this.

My personal experience, I'm in my eighth year as a leader and it really took me six years to affect real positive change. And so, you know, I think five years is too few in academic

medicine perhaps because we are such matrixed organizations and slow to change and there is a turnover cost to leadership.

And so I don't think there's a one size fits all. I do think when you hit double digits, when you hit 10 years, it's really time to begin asking, am I as effective as I used to be? And is there someone [00:17:00] else who could bring new energy into the role? I think the two other ways, you know, at here, at Wash U I think we have a good policy.

It may not be enough, but for at the chair, all chairs need to step down when they turn 70. And this is actually very strongly followed, and I think that is a positive. The last thing is part of being a good leader is thinking about succession planning, right? And that gets back to your leaders are right in front of you.

And so it's not simply that, oh, I'm heading into my 10th year, I need to retire or something. I think it's really be active and intentional about, well, is this next person, you know, who hopefully maybe could be from a diverse background that is, you know, unlike my own, who I can sponsor and promote to gain the skills to take my place.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, I think that that's kind of the ultimate type of sponsorship, right? Is that succession planning. And the reality is, is we're building those skills and [00:18:00] they may end up taking our role, but they may also broaden the opportunities that they have beyond our division, section, department, whatever space it is.

So I see it as really positive in many ways to be thinking that way, and it's hard to think about a next chapter or a repotting. I like that analogy. I always say next chapter, but I like that. And I think if we started to all think about life like that, it would become easier. And that's maybe not the model that we've had in academic medicine for a really long time.

You and I both had training program directors who were in those roles for decades, and that is kind of the way it seemed like things happened. And maybe it's changing that mindset over time.

Ben Humphreys: Yeah, I agree. And I think academic medicine is slow to change and has always been very hierarchical. But my sense is, I mean we're talking about it now and I think, yeah, that's a big step forward and I agree used to just be accepted. This is the way it is. [00:19:00]

Trish Kritek: Yes, that's definitely true. Okay. You've shared a ton of wisdom already. I'm wondering if there's any one last thing that you wanna share with our listeners on this topic. I think we've covered some of the territory that you covered in your talk, but I'm not sure if there's one last pearl that you might wanna share.

Ben Humphreys: I'm not sure that I have a concrete, you know, pearl that would apply to everybody. I would just say that personally, I'm really trying to work on that last step from

Herminia Ibarra you know, being an opportunity giver to being more of a public advocate. And this is something that's just really come to me over the last three or four years.

I grew up in a family where my mom was director of diversity for the electrical engineering and computer science department at UC Berkeley for 33 years. So these kinds of conversations, you know, come easily to me and yet I had always worked behind the scenes as an advocate or sponsor. I had never engaged in these kinds of public conversations.

And I think that's something that I found really [00:20:00] powerful and that's what I'm exploring now. It's why I'm here with you and I'm grateful for the opportunity and finally, I hope to serve as an example for, you know, male leaders to engage more publicly in these kinds of conversations and actions.

Trish Kritek: To be honest, Ben, that's part of the reason I invited you because the humility and thoughtfulness that you brought to this discussion, I think is a model for, for many folks in our community. And so I really appreciate you coming to join the UW community for the original talk, but also again, for this Thrivecast, I really think there's a lot here for folks to hear and learn from, and I do think that step into public advocacy is really important and powerful. So thank you for all that you do. Thanks for spending the time with us today and for having this conversation.

Ben Humphreys: You're so welcome, Trish. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

I've really enjoyed it and keep up this wonderful work on Thrivecast. [00:21:00]

Trish Kritek: Thank you, and for folks who are listening, if they wanna hear more episodes of Thrivecast, they can find them at Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcast. You can also always find them on the UW School of Medicine faculty website at faculty.uwmedicine.org.

Thanks for listening and have a great day.