

Thrivecast Episode 74: Succession Planning as an Act of Leadership

Giana Davidson: [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 Giana Davidson, and today I'm honored to welcome Dr. Tom Staiger. Dr. Staiger is a distinguished clinician, one of my mentors, and a leader who served as the medical director of UW Medical Center for nearly 14 years after first stepping into the interim role in 2008.

During that time, he helped guide the organization through really remarkable growth and transformative changes in healthcare, including the COVID pandemic. Before becoming medical director, he also served as the associate medical director, giving him more than two decades of leadership at University of Washington.

The strongest leaders don't simply build successful programs. They build people, they create opportunities for others to grow, and they leave organizations stronger than they found them. Today, we're going to explore a little bit what it means to lead with the future in mind, and how thoughtful succession planning becomes one of the most enduring acts of leadership.

Tom, [00:01:00] thanks so much for joining us.

Tom Staiger: Well, thanks so much for inviting me.

Giana Davidson: Reflecting back on your career, 14 years is a really long tenure for a medical director in, in that role. And when you accepted the role first as an interim, what did you hope would be, like, true when your time as medical director eventually came to an end?

Tom Staiger: Well, I had worked with two medical directors, first Eric Larson and then Ed Walker when I was an associate medical director, and then also having been a resident, uh, at the University of Washington. I was very mindful of the legacy, the tradition, the excellence of UW Medical Center. And, and so when I took the position, one of my goals was to try and leave the organization in at least as good a shape as I found it and hopefully better.

And a couple of the areas I wanted to focus on that were [00:02:00] under my purview, one was quality and safety, and the other was the professional practice environment. So I wanted to build on the strengths that we had in our quality program, help continue to encourage the culture of safety within the organization for people to speak up if there was something unsafe, and to work together to improve safety and quality.

And also wanted to, um, do what I could to help improve the practice environment. So to do anything possible to give physicians a voice in the things that affected their practice, and also to continue to improve the partnership between our physician leaders and our nursing leaders to help build the dyad system that Ed Walker had helped create and build upon that.

So those were two of the areas that, that I really wanted to focus on. And, and I, I feel like I was able to contribute and, [00:03:00] um, help make some progress in both of those areas for the organization.

Giana Davidson: That's great. So it sounds like you came into it with really good mentors yourself and really good leadership, sort of a foundation that was there.

How long did it take you to sort of, you know, envision what direction you wanted to go? Or did you know that right when you started?

Tom Staiger: Oh, I think I had some idea from having worked closely, you know, both with Eric and with Ed of where the opportunities were, where some of the things where I could bring some of my skills and strengths to bear.

But I found in any of the career transitions I've made that it takes about a year for-- It's always taken me about a year to sort of figure out the rhythms and how things work. And so that first year was, was more of a settling in, trying to figure out, you know, where, where I had the most opportunity to make a difference, uh, to try and refine some of that vision.[00:04:00]

Giana Davidson: Yeah, that's great. During your tenure, I'm sure there was, you know, many more big challenges than COVID. COVID sort of, I think, sticks out for all of us in healthcare. But as you were leading through different challenging times, how did you think about building a team

around you, and in particular, building a team that could carry forward what your vision was?

Tom Staiger: I think one of the most important, among the most important decisions that leaders make is who to hire and bring on. I was always very mindful of the team we were creating, who came onto that team. Always tried to look for the best possible people that we could find and was also mindful that getting different perspectives on who those team members should be was important.

So essentially always had more than just me interviewing people, weighing in on who we should bring as part of that team. So [00:05:00] recruiting as top quality team members as possible, then doing my best and our best to build a culture of teamwork to help support those people and, and to, to give people the latitude and the authority to do everything that they were comfortable with, but also the message to not feel like they had to make decisions that they were uncomfortable with and could come to me or to the, the group of medical leaders with issues and problems that we could work through.

And then to try and keep people as informed as possible about what was going on within the organizations, the challenges that, that were occurring, and the challenges that we might anticipate so that people could be as prepared as possible to handle things on their own that they could as they came up, which was especially important in dynamic times like during COVID.

Giana Davidson: Yeah. Yeah. [00:06:00] I appreciate that. And, and you know that challenge with moving from a leader who is carrying out projects, which I imagine to be in the position even as interim medical director and then as medical director, you were really great about getting things across the finish line. And then you move into a place where you're managing a lot of people and giving them the agency and the ability to, you know, maybe fall flat on their face, but maybe get their own projects across.

Tom Staiger: Exactly. I have a friend who runs a restaurant, and his restaurant makes pizzas. And one, one thing he told another friend who was moving into a leadership role is, "You can't be the one making the pizzas when you're, you're running the place. You've got to delegate that to

people." And so yeah giving people the autonomy and the authority to work on their own, yet the permission to come when there were obstacles and to be the executive sponsor for projects and, and initiatives was something that I tried to do.

Giana Davidson: That's great. [00:07:00] And when you're thinking about, like, folks that are listening to this that might be, you know, aspiring to have a leadership role in the hospital but not in the place where they have a formal leadership role What advice would you have for them to start preparing for that, you know, really before they have a formal title?

Tom Staiger: A couple things come to mind. One is within the bandwidth that somebody has to take on volunteer, really, opportunities to engage in projects and activities, because there's always things that need to be done around the organization, and resources are, are generally limited to do that. So, as people have an opportunity to get involved in something where they can contribute within the free time that they have to do that, that's a good way of getting involved, learning about leadership, learning the people who are involved in leadership and figuring out if that's a good fit.

Second is if [00:08:00] somebody, uh, recognizes a person doing the kind of leadership activities that they might like to do sometime, is setting up a time to have a cup of coffee with them to learn about what they do, how they came to take on that role, what they like, what they don't like. And so to identify, you know, one or, or ideally more than one person to learn from.

And then maybe finally, w- any leadership development opportunities that become available internally through UW Medicine or whichever organization one's a part of and/or through one's professional society to avail oneself of those learning opportunities to help build skills that, that will be useful as a leader.

Giana Davidson: Yeah, that's great advice. And I think much of it you gave me years ago.

Tom Staiger: That could well be.

Giana Davidson: You know, I'd [00:09:00] love to jump forward a bit to the last part of your career. Sure ... you know, I think something that's hard to

talk about is the succession planning. And I think the truth is in, you know, any transition there's loss.

And, you know, even if the change is really awesome, like I don't have to go to that 6:00 AM meeting anymore, I still might really miss the people that are there, and the relationships that you build with the, the people and the work that you're doing. And so I'm curious on, as you started to think about a shift and a shift away, how did you sort of cope with the part that's loss?

Tom Staiger: Partly by anticipating the transition. So as you probably recall, I gave notice to our executive director, Cindy Hecker, about a year before I transitioned out of the medical director role because mostly I wanted as smooth a transition as [00:10:00] possible to be able to occur to allow time for a search and, and for the organization to transition.

And that also gave me time to start changing my thinking to what it was going to be like for me not to be medical director. Around the same time, I transitioned out of doing primary care, so I was transitioning my practice as well as my administrative role and anticipating what I'd be doing afterwards.

And, and I have a good network of friends and close family and a number of activities that I engage in that, that, um, I knew I would be doing more of, uh, once I was no longer medical director and doing clinical care. So I was starting to anticipate that. And that said, I knew I would miss the people that I had been [00:11:00] working so closely with, as well as the patients that I'd been doing primary care for many years.

And I was prepared for that, but there was, and still is to some degree, a sense of loss of, of... It's a wonderful community at UW Medicine and people that I respect and care deeply for. And while I'm still in touch with many of them, it's nowhere near the kind of contact that I had, you know, when I was in my medical director role.

So that's something that, that I don't have that I used to really enjoy. It's offset by having a lot more time to do things that I also enjoy, and not having to deal with some of the, the headaches and the challenges and the early and late meetings that were a part of being a medical leader

Giana Davidson: I appreciate you sharing that and sort of the vulnerability of sharing, like the part about, you know, loss.

It sounds like having, you know, sort of a long run-in time in preparing and helping the [00:12:00] organization prepare and doing the things that needed to, to be done for that transitional period to feel successful are really important. And then I appreciate you talking about the things around you with, you know, family and friends and activities to help you support you too in a time that has some grief.

Tom Staiger: Yep.

Giana Davidson: As leaders are thinking maybe not towards retirement, but just succession planning from a role, what were the very earliest conversations that you started to like explore what maybe a next chapter would be? Like, who did you have to let know before you go right to, you know, at the time, Cindy Hecker?

Tom Staiger: Sure. Well, my wife, knew early on, obviously. I had conversations with friends who aren't part of the medical organization, you know, about transitioning. I've got a friend who headed a local organization and transitioned out that we chatted about some of that. And then I'm pretty sure early on that, both Cindy Hecker and Tim Dellit, [00:13:00] who I reported to in his role as chief medical officer, were, I think, the first two individuals that I told my plans to. And then with input from them and my own thoughts, figured out, you know, who else within the medical leadership team and the nursing leadership teams that I was going to let know personally before a broader announcement came out. And so we, we orchestrated that because, you know, Tim and Cindy sent out something toward the latter part of that summer, but by then I had let the people that I work with most closely know that I was going to be transitioning out of my role.

Giana Davidson: I mean, definitely on a recorded podcast you have to say that, that that's the order.

Tom Staiger: And I... It's been a while, but, that's as I [00:14:00] recall how things were. Yeah.

Giana Davidson: Yeah. Oh, I'm absolutely just teasing you. But I really appreciate what you said about, like, having the conversation with your wife and your friends.

A lot of times when I'm meeting with faculty that are talking about hard transitions and saying, "Who do you usually talk about, you know, big changes with or these things?" oftentimes they haven't made that step yet in, like, processing through how to decide when it's getting to be close to that, that chapter.

Mm-hmm. What surprised you most in the transitional period or in stepping away?

Tom Staiger: I'm not sure there's anything that totally surprised me. I knew I was going to feel emotional, you know, at various times when, you know, there was a going away party that happened, and I knew I would get emotional at that event.

Though maybe I probably was a little surprised how moved I was at that particular time. I think, you know, I guess I was a little surprised at, you know, the [00:15:00] sense of community that's within UW Medicine that I came to recognize and came to miss being as direct a part of, though I knew that was going to be, you know, part of the transition.

And then I guess I would say one thing that surprised me is I continue to have dreams about work. And sometimes it's patient care and sometimes it's administrative meetings, and most of them are not unpleasant dreams, although occasionally there'll be ones I'll wake up and I'll think, "I'm glad I'm not dealing with that."

But I didn't expect to carry, you know, administrative work and patient care forward within my psyche for as long as it seems to have maintained.

Giana Davidson: Oh, that's funny. Yeah, beware. Yeah. As a buyer, beware. That's great. So imagine folks are listening today that have just accepted, you know, their early leadership roles or their first major leadership role.

What is one thing that you hope they start [00:16:00] doing in the early part of their career that sort of prepares them for the upcoming succession plan for the next person stepping in?

Tom Staiger: One thing I would say is to continue to build a culture of teamwork- And to, to recruit strong leaders because none of us are going to be around forever, and some of us might wind up transitioning out for one reason or another sooner than we anticipated.

So I was always personally mindful that I didn't want to be indispensable. And so having strong leaders that, that one has recruited and then helped develop and encourage, as well as the team culture, communication support, open discussions, that will set the group, the team, the subsequent leaders up for success after one is no longer a [00:17:00] leader of that group.

Giana Davidson: Yeah, that's great advice. Sort of thinking for the longevity of the program as a whole.

Tom Staiger: Exactly.

Giana Davidson: Appreciate that. You know, whether you're a division head or you're directing a program or you're mentoring a trainee or simply thinking about your own career path, I really hope that today's conversation reminds you that succession planning isn't something reserved for the end of a leadership journey, but it's an ongoing investment in people, in relationships, in the future of our organization.

Tom, thanks so much for sharing your wisdom and experience with us today. It's really been a pleasure seeing you and having you on the podcast.

Tom Staiger: Giana, thank you so much for having me. Thank you for your leadership and ongoing commitment to the organization.

Giana Davidson: Absolutely. To our listeners, if you enjoyed today's episode, you can find more Thrivecast episodes on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

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you'd like us to feature in a future episode, we'd love to hear from
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