The theme of the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Society of University Otolaryngologists—Head and Neck Surgeons was “Role Models, Mentors and Leaders in Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery.” I was asked to reflect on the topic of being an effective department chairman. As I prepared for this brief address, I spent many hours reflecting on the times I thought I was effective, and even more time considering the attributes of chairmen I know who are very effective. I also read many recent books and reviewed my notes of old-time favorite books, about leadership in general and in business. In doing so, I tried to isolate the elements that appear to be most critical in achieving and sustaining effectiveness and the guiding principles that seem to drive those elements. The thoughts and comments that follow are the result of these reflections. I am hopeful that they will be useful, especially to young academicians aspiring to become chairmen.

As the first order of business, we must define the term “effective chairman.” Is it a status a department chairman reaches after achieving a certain number of accomplishments? Is it the end goal or product of a finite process of development? My experience has led me to believe that it is an ongoing process. Furthermore, I believe that being an effective chairman is a never-ending, dynamic personal quest, which matures and evolves into new ways of transforming one’s vision and values into action. The effective chairman has to be dynamic—responsive to changing circumstances. Department chairmen today face a constant barrage of diverse demands. The circumstances they face during periods of growth in their departments are different from those faced during periods of stability or those involved in a specific challenge. Although we can be guaranteed that circumstances will change, the guiding principles of a chairman must not change.

Unfortunately, so much has been said and written about guiding principles that those two words are almost a cliché. And, depending upon whom one listens to, these principles can point the aspiring chairman in opposite directions.

An effective department chairman has to execute three distinct but interconnected roles. They are the roles of chairman as administrator, chairman as manager, and chairman as leader.

The role of administrator requires awareness of and compliance with regulations such as HIPAA, rules in patient care, Residency Review Committee.
requirements in resident education, Human Subject Protection regulations in clinical research, and so on. The good news is that many aspects of this role can be delegated. The bad news is that those delegated duties cannot be ignored or dismissed. Lack of compliance by someone on the faculty is ultimately the responsibility of the chairman. Such mistakes leave the chairman vulnerable if not liable and, therefore, less effective. However, unbalanced focus on these administrative duties, especially without adequate management and leadership skills, can and will doom a chairman to mind-numbing tedium at best, and total failure at worst. Let us, then, examine the management component of being an effective chairman.

Management is the process of working with people and resources to accomplish the goals of the organization. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to elaborate on each one of the fundamentals of management. Suffice it to say that the two-fold goal of good management is efficiency and positive results. Accountability is essential for achieving that goal, and the effective chairman/manager must monitor results to assure accountability. One must remember that people are more apt to do what is inspected than to do what is expected. Therefore, the effective chairman must choose a monitoring tool—dashboards, periodic reports, or any other that he/she is comfortable with—and use it regularly and consistently.

Management of a department is the responsibility of the chair, but effective chairmen often delegate some managerial functions. They do as President Ronald Reagan suggested: “Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don’t interfere.” (Ronald Reagan, September 15, 1986.) The best people are those with appropriate training and managerial skills, those whose knowledge and skills complement or fill gaps in the expertise or interest of the chairman and, not to be overlooked, those with the right “chemistry.”

One of the most important responsibilities of the chairman as manager is to make decisions. In discharging this responsibility, effective chairmen welcome input from all appropriate sources and acknowledge that they do not know all the answers. However, they remain firmly in charge and retain the right and the duty to make the final decision. In this regard, the following maxim of Cyrus the Great is very apt: “Diversity in counsel, (but) unity in command.” When faced with the need to make an important decision, effective managers do as Michael Roberto of the Harvard Business School suggests in his book, Managing for Conflict and Consensus. Why Great Leaders Don’t Take Yes for an Answer. They do not fixate on the question “What decision should I make?” instead, they ask the question “How should I go about making this decision?”

Effective managers accept that in a complex organization such as a hospital or a medical school, decision making is far from a purely intellectual process. They understand that emotional and social dynamics are involved. In that regard, two books by Daniel Goleman will be worthwhile to the reader: first, Emotional Intelligence. Why it Can Matter More than IQ, in which the author describes a different and important way of being smart, a way he calls “emotional intelligence,” which encompasses the following five characteristics and abilities: self-awareness, mood management, self-motivation, empathy, and managing of interpersonal interactions; and second, Primal Leadership, in which the authors explore the role of emotional intelligence in leadership and management.

Effective managers also accept the fact that politics cannot be removed from the decision-making process. Therefore, the effective chairman should embrace politics. Politics is not a dirty or shameful thing when it is understood as “the practice and skill of working with people and through people to attain a goal” and it is guided by sound personal principles.

Finally, effective managers understand, accept, and respect generational differences. We find ourselves in a unique time, when, in any academic department, as many as four generations may coexist. The values and attitudes of each generation are simply different. The personality and attitude of the Traditionalists (1900–1945) in the working environment can be described as “respect for the chain of command and loyalty”; for the Baby Boomers (1946–1964), it is more likely “change of command and optimism”; for the Generation Xers (1965–1980), it is “self-command and individualism”; and for the Millennials (1981–1999), it is probably best described as “don’t command, collaborate.” Awareness of these generational differences is essential to effectively manage an academic department today.

Next we come to the most transcendental role of an effective chairman—that of leader. In contrast to many administrative and managerial duties, which are often delegated by the effective chairman, leadership can never be delegated.
I believe that the foundation of leadership is trust, and that the key ingredients to attain trust are knowledge and respect. Knowledge, first, of your discipline, the importance of which should be self-explanatory. Then, knowledge of yourself, of your strengths and your flaws, of who you truly are and what you want to do. This leads to self-acceptance and to a truthful self-image, which are the keys to being an authentic individual. Being authentic is essential to establishing lasting trust. And finally, knowledge about the people you work with— their needs, their ambitions, their fears.

Add to this knowledge respect for yourself and for the people who work with you, and you will generate trust. Mutual trust and respect also facilitate and encourage the candid dialogue and communication that are so important to being an effective chairman.

How can a chairman, then, sustain trust and remain effective as a leader? Let me offer seven tenets for sustaining effective leadership.

First and foremost, one must act with integrity at all times. And I mean, at all times. No tolerance for a little lapse here and there. There can be no minor lapses of integrity in a role that is based on trust.

Second, one must follow the “golden rule.” Before this is dismissed as another cliché, let me state what I believe the “golden rule” of an effective chairman should be: “Always do the right thing, regardless of the impact it may have on you.” Of course, this begs the question, what is the right thing? It is hard to know, especially in these permissive times when almost anything can be rationalized. In that regard, the following short poem says a lot:

Is it right?
Maybe not says the world,
It’s not a trend.
Think of it this way,
says a friend.
It’s not so bad!
But, deep within,
the silent voice,
It’s right, it says.
You know it is.
-Anonymous

In the end, almost always, we know what is right when our values, our guiding principles, are unconditional rather than dependent on certain conditions or ulterior motives. To clarify, compare these two beliefs or values:

“You shall not steal,” and
“Do not steal if you want respect in the community.”

The first is unconditional and it will guide you well. The second, “do not steal if…” is conditional and may lead you astray.

Third, to remain effective, a leader must be inspiring, must be able to influence people into action. However, you cannot be an inspiring leader if you are not inspired yourself! It is not easy to remain inspired. When your inspiration is wearing down, talk to someone who inspires you, read a book that inspires you, do something you know will energize you. For me, inspiration is sometimes as close as the nearest bookstore. I was in New Haven a couple of weeks ago on a rainy Saturday morning, feeling kind of down, waiting to go home. I walked into one of my favorite places, Barnes & Noble, and the title of this little book caught my eye. Being Perfect, by Anna Quindlen. As I started leafing through it, I felt a surge of inspiration. What an insightful mind. I felt charged up! I read the whole book right there. I bought the book and brought it home. I gave copies to my daughters and to my son. Know yourself! Stay inspired!

Fourth, as leaders, effective chairmen must be what I call “realistic optimists.” They do not just survive. They thrive in the world as it is, not as they wish it to be. That wish-world does not exist in the here-and-now. Realistic optimists understand that life is sometimes tough, but then, instead of projecting fear or anxiety, they project a sense of confidence and determination because they know themselves and those around them. Realistic optimists learn to take control where they can and stop investing energy in things beyond their control. They learn to get over failure quickly.

Realistic optimism enables the effective chairman to set the tone, the general mood, of their department in a positive, optimistic frame. It also enables them to take the kind of risks that are necessary to be an effective leader. Without realistic optimism, a chairman can become reticent, or even worse, paralyzed by gloom or the fear of failure.

Fifth, effective leaders have the ability and the willingness to groom, mentor, and develop those around them. Suffice it to say that chairmen who leave a legacy that outlives them are those who invest in people. There are many examples of this type of individual in our specialty; to name a few, I would mention John Conley, Paul Ward, Helmuth Goepfert. Perhaps Alan Loy McGinnis expressed it best when he said, “There is no more noble occu-
Sixth, it is hard to be an effective chairman without resources!! As we well know, dollars from the traditional sources for academic departments (federal/state funds, research grants and clinical practice) are increasingly difficult to obtain. Therefore, an effective chairman has to be versed and creative on fundraising and entrepreneurial activities to procure alternative funds through endowments and investments. Such funding sources are becoming essential to secure the resources that are necessary today to recruit and retain faculty, to maintain state-of-the-art educational programs, and to support research in clinical departments. It is hard to be effective without those funds!

Finally, as an effective leader, one must be engaged with the institution. One must be connected, must be a player! If called to serve, answer by doing the best possible job. Accept the jobs that others reject because they are hard. If not called to serve, volunteer. Being involved through service will accomplish two things that are essential to being an effective chairman: it creates good will toward you and toward your department; and, more importantly, it eventually gets you a place at the table where important issues are discussed, where decisions are made. You cannot represent the interest of your department if you are an outsider. You must be inside the circle and keep a finger on the pulse of what is going on at the institution and have a voice. Furthermore, in the present and future environment in which creative corporate/academic partnerships are being forged and the clinical practice of the faculty of academic medical centers is being structured like multispecialty practice groups, effective chairman must be able to see and work collaboratively for what is best for the enterprise as a whole. This may be difficult, at times, since the long-term benefit to their department may not be apparent because of the lack of an immediate or tangible gain.

In summary, these comments are not intended to be an all-inclusive cookbook about how to be an effective chairman, but rather an invitation to reflect. Some of the tenets I have outlined are easier said than done. By the same token, they are not something one can delay upon becoming a chairman. Start now on your own never-ending quest. Put yourself in situations in which you will learn and grow. Do the things others are unwilling to do. Be authentic. Be trustworthy. Be realistically optimistic. Avail yourself of the many books, seminars, and courses that are available. Be disciplined but have fun preparing yourself, and when the opportunity to be a chairman comes, it will be natural and easier to be “effective.”

REFERENCES