

+ BEYOND THE MASK: Interview with Dr. Beverley Orser

Interviewed by Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, BA, MBA, DM, CMC, BTM Strategic Consultant, and Emily Hill, the Section's Administrative Coordinator



Dr. Beverley Orser, a highly-regarded anesthesiologist, researcher and health system leader, practices at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre (Toronto). She is affiliated with the Sunnybrook Research Institute and holds a number of leadership positions, including: Director of Research for Sunnybrook's Department of Anesthesia; professor, Department of Physiology, University of Toronto; and incoming Chair (as of July 1, 2017), Department of Anesthesia,

University of Toronto. She is also a former holder of a Canada Research Chair in Anesthesia. Dr. Orser is extremely modest about her achievements- "I am nothing special. I am not a rocket scientist" -and attributes much of her success to support and encouragement from several colleagues, mentors and team members. We had the pleasure of sitting down to talk to Dr. Orser about her remarkable experiences.

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The key points of Dr. Orser's philosophy about leadership can be summarized in four 'C's' and three 'S's, starting with **Commit**. She started her career as a GP-Anesthetist and embarked on additional training after being inspired as a medical student by the difference made by an anesthesiologist in an under-resourced area. Dr. Vince Hughes was working at St. Jude's Hospital in St. Lucia. After Hurricane David devastated the island, Vince was delayed by road closures in getting to the hospital. "When Dr Hughes was finally able to show up, I saw what his presence did in that disaster situation and how talented and committed he was. He became a role model." Her advice is to find a problem and stick with it. "I think what I have been fortunate to be, is determined and committed. My advice

to young leaders and researchers: try to find a problem that fundamentally speaks to you and that you think is important. If you are determined and are fortunate enough to find yourself in the right environment, things will work out okay. Be sure to have some fun along the way as the time available is not infinite. It is usually more fun with a group of folks who share the same interest and passion. Expect the falls; you are not pushing hard enough if there are no falls. Weather the bumps— and expect that things will not always go well. Build resilience."

Step Up. This is somewhat akin to 'lean in'! Take advantage of opportunities. Give back to your community and grow others. Dr. Orser reflected on how her early mentors prepared her for leadership roles, "There does come a point when you have to step up and accept responsibility, even if it uncomfortable or unfamiliar. And I think ideally, you want to try to grow into leadership positions in a step by step manner. You want to make sure you've learned how to take on those responsibilities in an appropriate manner with the right toolsets." Dr. Orser advocates continuing to be open to new avenues and opportunities. Listening to the patient is absolutely critical in her mind before, during and after surgery: "The patient, their family and the patient's physiological and pathophysiological responses can tell you what you want or need to know in order to provide optimal care".

Be Curious: Wanting to learn more and find answers, Dr. Orser knew that further education was required to learn the language of the world of science she was entering. She went on to complete her specialty FRCPC training in Anesthesiology at McMaster and Oxford Universities, and to earn her Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences at the University of Toronto. She describes herself as being amazed at the lack of understanding as to how anesthetic drugs actually work – which was stalling the introduction of new anesthetic drugs. A milestone for her lab was when the team discovered the properties of a population of inhibitory receptors, pharmacological properties that hadn't been described before. "We really stumbled on this because we were looking for anesthetic sensitive receptors and these receptors were causing problems in our experiments. It turned out there was this whole new population of inhibitory receptors that have now become the focus of our work." Being curious is not constrained to science or medicine. Dr. Orser believes there is much to be learned from other disciplines and continues to read widely, including business literature to learn more about such topics as team development.

Be Strategic and Selective: Dr. Orser co-founded her laboratory with another outstanding researcher, Dr. John Macdonald, who mentored Dr. Orser through her Ph.D. "John really had a true love of knowledge and scientific advancement. He taught me how to choose people carefully to be on the team. You need to be strategic and selective about who you are sharing your time with." So, it is important to identify the right environment in which you will flourish.

Not every mentorship relationship works. Dr. Orser went on to say, “It is most important to watch carefully. Watch how the people that seem to be effective make their decisions and execute their decisions. I also think soft mentoring is important. We are fortunate to be surrounded by leaders all the time, and some are good, even outstanding and some are not so good - but the point is to watch carefully to see what’s most effective, what’s most principled, what motivates a group to move forward – and select your mentors accordingly.”

Both Collaborate and Compete: Dr. Orser believes in driving for excellence but without compromising values. She adopted and continues to use the team based-approach she learned from Dr. Macdonald, “It is all about peer support and keeping the core message alive. Create the environment where team members can thrive. Retain high standards, be rigorous, model a strong work ethic and never compromise integrity for productivity. Celebrate achievements and when things get tough just fall back on that core message.” Establishing a vision and mission for your lab that will motivate and energize all members of the research team is key. Dr. Orser also believes in sharing knowledge generously, celebrating success and ensuring that everyone is recognized appropriately. However, she is also a ferocious competitor, a character trait that she attributes to having an identical twin sister! Wins – especially in the research lab - continue to excite and motivate her. Attaining the necessary resource for success remains highly competitive and surviving, let alone thriving, requires sound instincts and social acumen. Her counsel in this regard is to do the hard work required and set yourself up for success by using your time thoughtfully. “You are not entitled - so work hard and seek out those who can help you. Find the group that will move things forward. Celebrate small wins. Be both patient and respectful – try for win-win outcomes and ensure that your work can withstand scrutiny and criticism.”

Dr. Orser says her medical, research and leadership journey was never planned or calculated, “I don’t think I every planned it, I just went from one step to the next and it seemed like the right thing to do at the time.” But it is clear that throughout Dr. Orser’s career, she has been committed to caring for her patients, “I like the sense of taking care of patients and I have the sense of being pulled into that level of responsibility. The research is not just helping one patient, it is helping a lot of patients. That’s the motivating factor.” We look forward to seeing more breakthroughs from the Orser Laboratory and wonderful work by Dr. Orser in her clinical, research and education roles.