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Leadership

Once upon a time, honorable behavior on a sinking ship meant that women and children had first access to the lifeboats and, if necessary, the captain went down with the ship. In more modern times, a military commander made sure that his troops had food and shelter. In any event, he did not eat until he was assured that the troops were provided for. This approach is supported not by an abstract sense of what is honorable but by the sure notion that physical and emotional support of the troops ensure their ability to serve the mission.

How different is it in the modern medical environment? When the going gets rough, it is roughest for those on the bottom, even up to the ranks of physicians providing patient care as full-time employees of a medical center; particularly when it seems that some medical policy administrators may view their status as one of privilege rather than one of responsibility and obligation. Their actions may suggest that they have forgotten that they are entrusted with ensuring the welfare of the patients, which is accomplished by ensuring the welfare of those caring for the patients.

In an academic medical center, it has always seemed to me that the leaders are entrusted in a lighthearted sense with the care and feeding of the faculty. More seriously, the leaders are also entrusted with these lives; they are obligated to nourish and protect those who have committed their careers and, in a sense, their lives and the lives of their families to the mission of the center.

Yes, these are difficult times. Cutbacks, constraints and the need to do more with less dominate. The leader's role, however, is as it was in the early days of infantry and cavalry charges: to rally the troops, to goad, to encourage; to make them believe that despite their fears and doubts, the prize is worth the risk and victory is ultimately possible despite the hardships and setbacks encountered in the battle. In many military engagements, after the initial rout, the tide of the battle was turned by leaders who rallied their troops.

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Scatter

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I doubt that many battles have been won with the slogans “the future is bleak” and “the outlook is grim.” This should not be construed, however, to suggest that all that is needed is a winning slogan. A program must be consistent with the available resources. It must support the belief that the battle can be won, even if resources are limited. Mutual respect, credibility and integrity in responding to queries about the availability of resources would be more effective toward making the lonely soldier standing guard in the cold night believe that the dawn will come, bringing with it the warmth and light of the sun.

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