

The Leaders We Never Planned to Become

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People often assume that becoming a Matron, a Head of Nursing, or



sitting at the decision-making table means you've somehow arrived. That you have all the answers. That you have endless confidence. That leadership comes with certainty. The truth, is quite the opposite.

Being a Matron does not mean you know everything. In fact, the further we have progressed in our careers, the more we have realised how much we still have to learn.

Leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about being comfortable not having them. It is about asking questions, seeking advice, listening to different perspectives and recognising that the people around us often hold pieces of the solution that we cannot see on our own.

Although our careers have followed different paths, the lessons have been remarkably similar.

Between us, we bring more than 35 years of NHS experience, spanning Specialist Medicine, Women's Health, operational leadership, urgent and emergency care, and children's services.

Lola's career has centred on Children's A&E, supporting children, families and teams through some of the most challenging and rewarding moments healthcare can offer.

Petra's journey has included leading services as a Matron within Specialist Medicine before moving into Women's Health and operational leadership.

Over those years, we have led teams through periods of transformation, unprecedented pressure, personal loss and extraordinary achievement.

Different specialties, different challenges, but the same fundamental truth:

Leadership is about people.

Throughout our careers, we have experienced some of the toughest periods, healthcare has known. The day-to-day pressures of operational leadership, the challenges of COVID-19, and the heartbreak of losing colleagues and friends along the way. There have been many moments when the demands felt relentless.

It is easy in those moments to become overwhelmed.

- * Emails arrive faster than they can be answered.
- * Problems emerge simultaneously.
- * Everyone needs something.
- * Everyone tells you their issue is urgent.

Over time, we both learned something important.

When everything feels overwhelming, sometimes the most productive thing a leader can do is stop. Not because we are avoiding the situation, but because creating space to think allows perspective. It allows us to ask a simple question:

What is actually important right now?

We often hear that everything is urgent. The reality is that very little is. Leadership is often less about action and more about prioritisation. It is about creating clarity when others see chaos and remaining calm enough to distinguish between what demands immediate attention and what can wait.

There were times, however, when we did not feel calm at all.

Moments when the pressure felt too much, when self-doubt crept in and when quitting seemed easier than carrying on.

What got us through those moments was not a leadership course, a policy or a textbook.

- It was people.
- Someone noticing.
- Someone asking if we were okay.
- Someone showing empathy when we needed it most.

That simple act of human connection has the power to change a life.

It certainly changed ours.

The leaders we remember most are not the ones who always had the answers. They are the ones who saw us at our most vulnerable and reminded us that we did not have to face things alone.

Those experiences taught us that leadership begins with humanity.

Too often, we speak about strategy, performance and targets before we speak about people. Yet every person we lead carries invisible pressures, responsibilities and challenges.

A kind word, a genuine conversation or simply taking the time to listen can have an impact far greater than we will ever know.

One of us often reflects on the highs and lows of Children's A&E. No two days are ever the same. You see children and families at some of their most frightened and vulnerable moments while supporting teams working under enormous pressure.

Through all of those experiences came a simple realisation: the kind of leader worth being is a genuine one.

Not someone who pretends everything is okay.

Not someone who has every answer.

But someone who is present, listens, shows compassion, has honest conversations and makes people feel that they genuinely matter.

And perhaps most importantly, someone who never loses sight of joy.

Even on the hardest shifts there can be laughter, a child who suddenly smiles, a family saying thank you, a colleague doing something brilliant, or a team somehow finding a way through an incredibly difficult day together. Those moments matter.

They remind us why we do what we

Healthcare will always have its challenges, but we hope we never become so focused on the pressures that we stop seeing the people, the compassion and the joy within it.

Another lesson we have both learned is that it is surprisingly easy to become your own harshest critic.

For a long time, when problems arose, our instinct was to be hard on ourselves. Self-criticism can feel productive because it gives us something to focus on. In reality, it can become a way of avoiding the issue itself. It is often easier to question your own worth than it is to face a difficult problem head on.

Over time, we learned to ask different questions.

What are the facts? What can I learn? What needs to happen next?

Reflection is essential.

But reflection is very different from self-blame.

Owning a mistake, reflecting honestly, seeking feedback and learning from experience is not just an important leadership skill, it is active role modelling. It shows others that growth matters more than perfection. It creates environments where people feel safe to learn rather than hide.

Credibility is not built by being right all the time.

It is built by being authentic enough to admit when you are wrong and courageous enough to do something about it.

The same applies to leadership style.

No two people are the same, so why should we lead everyone in exactly the same way?

We both feel strongly about the danger of labelling people. Labels can be useful for systems, but they can also be restrictive. When we place people into boxes, we often stop seeing them as individuals.

We have always believed in a simple principle:

See me for who I am. The real me.

Not my title.

Not assumptions.

Not someone else's perception.

Just me.

The same is true for every member of our teams.

Get to know your people. Learn their names. Understand their personalities. Know what matters to them. Listen to their aspirations. Understand their challenges.

What may seem like a minor issue to you may feel overwhelming to someone else. As leaders, we should never downplay another person's struggles simply because they differ from our own.

People need to feel seen before they can thrive.

When we truly understand people, we can develop them in a personalised way because one approach does not fit all. Leadership is not about making people fit a mould. It is about recognising individual strengths and creating opportunities for people to flourish as themselves.

We have both seen people exceed every expectation because somebody believed in them, invested in them and took the time to understand them.

People often say kindness is free.

We agree, but we would add something to that.

Kindness, fairness and genuinely inclusive, compassionate leadership will always return to you tenfold.

It is one of the greatest investments you can make in your team.

Positive workplace culture does not happen by accident. It is built deliberately through every interaction, every decision and every conversation. It is built when people feel valued, respected, heard and supported. When people feel that way, something remarkable happens.

- They go above and beyond.
- They support each other.
- They bring their best selves to work.
- And ultimately, they provide better care.

Because happy staff create better patient experiences.

The culture we create behind the scenes is often reflected in the care delivered at the bedside. As we reflect on our journeys, we know we are still learning. We will still make mistakes. We will still face challenges. There will still be moments of uncertainty.

But if there is one thing we have learned, it is this:

Leadership is not about being perfect.

It is about being human.

It is about having the courage to care, the humility to learn, the objectivity to face problems head on, and the compassion to lift others when they need it most.

The leaders we became are not the leaders we expected to become.

They are better.

Because they were shaped not only by success, but by struggle.

Not only by achievement, but by reflection.

Not only by leadership, but by the kindness of others who helped carry the burden when we thought we could not continue.

Leadership is not about having all the answers.

It is about being present.

It is about being kind.

It is about finding joy, even in difficult moments.

And it is about never losing sight of the people at the heart of everything we do.

And that is the kind of leaders we continue striving to be every day.