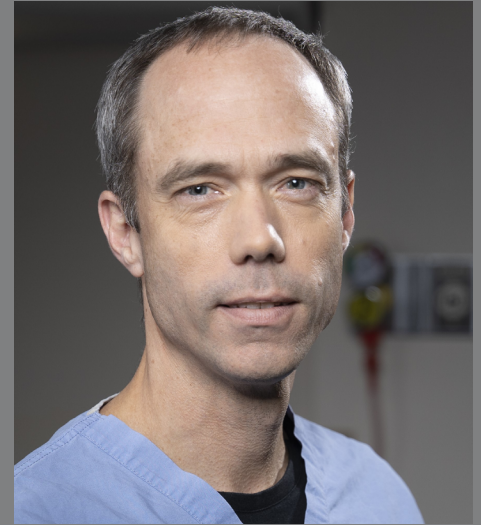


Leadership insights from Dr. Paul Hannam: a legacy of innovation, adaptability, and investment in people



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“If I can identify and nurture interests in the people around me... to see a person with potential really start to realize that, in an environment that I created, and they’re willing to take responsibility for it... that’s leadership essentially. They’re becoming a leader themselves.” — Dr. Paul Hannam, 2022

Dr. Paul Hannam was chief of emergency medicine at North York General Hospital from 2019 to 2022 and chief and medical director at Michael Garron Hospital from 2008 to 2019. He was a Canadian leader in the implementation of point-of-care ultrasound (POCUS) in Toronto’s emergency departments, and he was known for his tireless mentorship of emerging physician leaders. Dr. Hannam’s leadership and commitment to innovation left an enduring impact on the health care landscape.

Inspired by Dr. Hannam’s leadership and innovative approach to emergency medicine, I interviewed him for an assignment as part of my master’s degree in systems leadership and innovation at the University of Toronto.

Little did I know that this interview would become a poignant tribute to a remarkable leader who, unfortunately, left us too soon when he died from sudden cardiac failure 10 days later. His humility, focus on people, and ability to lead from within were evident in every word he spoke. The views and experience from a frontline clinical leader's perspective on leading innovation that he shared in our interview are summarized below.

Summary of my 40-minute interview with Dr. Paul Hannam on 6 July 2022

Dr. Hannam on implementing innovation

A pivotal moment in Dr. Hannam's leadership journey was the successful implementation of POCUS throughout emergency departments, starting at Michael Garron Hospital in 2009. His meticulous approach involved personal investment, effective communication with stakeholders, and intentional feedback, which ultimately led to the program's expansion to other hospitals across the Greater Toronto Area.

When asked about lessons learned from POCUS implementation, Dr. Hannam highlighted six essential actions (Box 1). First, build trust by laying out the plan. Next, reflect on who will gain, and who will potentially lose because of the change and how that will impact your goal. Dr. Hannam believed a leader must seek out the views of those who disagree, as they have concerns worth considering. By using this technique, he was able to carefully address legitimate concerns without letting them escalate into personal attacks. His advice to leaders was to maintain a clear head, separate personal feelings from the process, and communicate clearly when faced with such a situation. By doing so, he successfully built trust among stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of POCUS in his emergency department and, ultimately, improve patient care and outcomes.

Dr. Hannam on encouraging innovation

In addition to his views on innovation in health care, Dr. Hannam shared crucial insights on encouraging innovation (Box 2). He highlighted the importance of having situational awareness and understanding the key issues faced by the team, nurturing the expertise of those around him, and

Box 1

Dr. Hannam's essential actions when implementing innovation

1.

Build trust with key stakeholders by laying out specific plans so they are reassured.

2.

Be aware of who gains and who loses with any change. Anticipate and respond.

3.

Scout the response of those who disagree with you as there may be legitimate concerns.

4.

Maintain a clear head. Have the emotional intelligence to not respond to personal attacks.

5.

Walk the talk: participate in the innovation yourself.

6.

Invest in people. Help them achieve self-actualization to become leaders themselves.

then empowering them to take responsibility and implement their ideas. He cautioned that timing is key: even if an idea is the right solution, one must sometimes wait until the timing is right.

“Knowing who to talk to, how to talk to them, is important... and as individuals, what are they interested in and what drives them.”

Dr. Hannam on innovation during a crisis

Dr. Hannam’s insights on the significance of innovation, especially during the dynamic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic were powerful. He emphasized the importance of being flexible, continually innovating, and anticipating emerging challenges. As chief of the emergency department, he also stressed the importance of understanding the diverse roles and challenges faced by various health care professionals, from the frontline staff to CEOs.

“To me, the most important next step is constantly changing... you really need to be dynamic and very focused on what’s coming, not what has been.”

Dr. Hannam’s foresight on health care

Looking into the future, Dr. Hannam saw that access to care would continue to be a significant challenge for emergency departments and the health care system in general. Despite uncertainties, his focus remained on the fundamental aspects of patient care — listening to patients, addressing their symptoms, making diagnoses, and ensuring safe disposition plans.

“How do we best do that? To me, it’s by focusing on the people and the skills that I have... patients should feel trust that I have their back, or the organization has their back... I see myself as a facilitator.”

Dr. Hannam on his leadership style

When reflecting on his own leadership style, Dr. Hannam humbly described it as one centred around investing in people and not influenced by motives such as awards, money, or status. Instead, he found the most satisfaction in seeing individuals realize their own potential and achieve self-actualization, in an environment that he helped create and foster. Dr. Hannam found joy in the success and growth of his team members — something he spoke

Box 2

How to encourage innovation according to Dr. Hannam

1.

Have situational awareness by being present and aware of current issues.

2.

Identify and nurture the expertise, talents, skills, and interests of others around you.

3.

Empower them to take responsibility and implement their ideas.

4.

Timing is key. Recognize the ecosystem in which one works and present great ideas at the right time.

passionately about throughout the interview. He humbly acknowledged that the diverse team of 45 emergency physicians he worked with were all, in his view, smarter than him.

“I think a key piece for me is to rely on the people around me as much as possible. If I can use their expertise, I am much more effective in trying to come up with solutions than just in my own head.”

Concluding the interview, Dr. Hannam reflected that his vision was to support a group of leaders with diverse expertise and to build a culture of trust within his team. His mantra was “leading from within.”

My reflections

For those who work in medicine, Dr. Hannam’s perspectives on and knowledge of leadership have immense relevance, especially for emergency departments of the future. With an ever-changing world, from navigating the COVID-19 pandemic to the introduction of AI into clinical settings, it is humbling to reflect on Dr. Hannam’s thoughts on the innovation process. His leadership philosophy, rooted in humility and collaboration, and his focus on collective success serve as an inspiring example for current and future leaders. It was truly a privilege to interview this prominent health care leader, and, as I reflect on his various experiences, I am inspired to incorporate similar values into my own leadership journey. He was certainly a health care systems leader to emulate.

Dr. Hannam’s legacy also serves as a timeless reminder that effective leadership extends beyond policies and processes, leaving an enduring mark on individuals and the health care landscape. It is with gratitude and sadness that we share his wisdom, hoping to share the knowledge and legacy of a leader who, though no longer with us, continues to inspire.

View the entire interview here:

<https://youtu.be/chqzLX3aPPU>

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Rosemary Hannam and Dr. Abi Sriharan for their support in the preparation and review of this manuscript.



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