

Wholehearted leadership: the HEART of a leader

A keynote address by David MacLean



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David MacLean's powerful address, delivered with humility and humour, challenged physicians to reimagine leadership as an act of service and courage. Speaking as both a leadership coach and a patient living with multiple cancers, MacLean underscored the life-saving power of health care professionals while urging them to embrace wholehearted leadership.

MacLean opened with gratitude for the care he received during his cancer journey. This personal story framed his core message: leadership is influence, and, in health care, influence is an everyday act. Drawing from diverse examples, from the Winnipeg Jets to a chance encounter with a pizza delivery musician who helped shape a rock anthem, MacLean illustrated how passion, purpose, and conviction transform ordinary roles into extraordinary impact.

He presented the seven commitments of wholehearted leadership, summarized by the mnemonic HEART.

- **Humility:** It's not about you. Acknowledge limits, seek others' perspectives, and remember that no one is indispensable.



- **Empathy:** Understand others' stories before judging; leadership is about connection, not command.
- **Authenticity:** Be genuine, act with integrity, and have the courage to say what needs to be said.
- **Risk:**
 - » **Courage:** Push through fear and embrace vulnerability; courage is action, not absence of fear.
 - » **Vulnerability:** Open up to build trust; depth in relationships is impossible without it.
 - » **Fail:** See failures as first attempts in learning; true innovation requires risk.
- **Tenacity:** Sustain effort toward a worthy goal; grit distinguishes those who persevere.

MacLean's message to physician leaders was clear: health care's challenges — burnout, bureaucracy, and fragility — demand a shift from command-and-control models to heart-centred leadership. Physicians must become "risk-takers" and "spenders of themselves for others," challenging outdated systems and breaking free from paralysis by analysis. Echoing Angela Duckworth's work on grit, MacLean argued that passion, persistence, and courage, not perfection, are the real hallmarks of leadership.

He closed with a simple yet profound takeaway: leadership is not about titles or hierarchy. It's about the daily, human work of helping others become better than they thought possible.

MacLean's message is a call to action: for physicians to lead not just with their heads, but with their hearts.

Author

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Mantra:

"Embrace the present moment, honor authenticity, and build connections that empower, heal and inspire. True growth is found in aligning actions with values, dismantling hustle culture, and courageously walking the path toward transformation."