

COMMENTARY

Leadership Lessons and Career Advice From the Musical *Hamilton*

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The musical *Hamilton*, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, creatively depicts the life and career of founding father Alexander Hamilton. While Hamilton is the primary focus, highlights of the career and personal journeys of other leaders, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr, are interjected throughout the production. Often the musical numbers in *Hamilton* focus on aspects of leadership and career development that Hamilton and his contemporaries were learning or needed to learn. These lessons are applicable to the challenges that faculty members in academic pharmacy face today at different stages of a career. These include the importance of maximizing opportunities, listening, self-reflection, compromise, patience, empathy, prioritizing, tending relationships, making difficult decisions, knowing when to say goodbye, and managing a legacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling through music has long been a source of sharing perspectives and lessons. The power of lyrics can inspire contemplation beyond the basic story lines, especially when associated with themes of ethics, morals, or imparting wisdom. Broadway musicals are especially adept at connecting with large audiences, and the hit musical *Hamilton* was no exception.¹ As a musical that focuses on leadership and career journeys, *Hamilton* highlights many key lessons that are applicable within academics. In this commentary, we explore several of these major themes, including maximizing opportunities, listening, self-reflection, compromise, patience, empathy, prioritizing, tending relationships, approaching difficult decisions, knowing when to say goodbye, and managing a legacy.

Maximizing Opportunities: “Not Throwin’ Away My Shot”

In a career, opportunities may present in unanticipated ways and at unforeseen times, necessitating critical

thinking on whether to pursue a particular opportunity. Early in his career, Alexander Hamilton is an ambitious young man who is determined to make a difference in his new country. His reputation, writing skills, and work ethic are noticed by George Washington, who asks him to serve as his aide-de-camp. Despite the prestige of this opportunity, Hamilton is reticent to accept because the career path he had envisioned involved service in the military rather than a secretarial role. However, Hamilton recognized the potential benefits and accepted the position despite it not being his first choice. Working with Washington ultimately led to many opportunities for Hamilton to influence the development of the new nation.

Similarly, it is rare in academia that a faculty member’s career follows an envisioned path as unexpected opportunities may arise while planned advancements may never occur. Navigating this pathway early in an academic career can be difficult; thus, having strong mentors is important. The decision to pursue a new opportunity or a leadership role should not be taken lightly as it may not be the right choice for a faculty member at that time. Alternatively, some of the most successful leaders were not seeking new roles when an opportunity arose. Instead, they may have initially been appointed to an interim role

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and flourished in it and/or were encouraged by a mentor to consider a leadership role. Finding the proper balance and identifying mentors to provide wise guidance are both extremely important in career advancement.

Listening: “Talk Less, Smile More”

Academia is an environment that encourages individual exploration of research and clinical practice while still requiring group collaboration and consensus on mission, vision, and values. It is not unusual for faculty members with different roles within the institution to have difficulty understanding others’ points of view when considering curriculum, budget, or issues facing the larger faculty or college. Thus, active listening is a critical skill required for collaboration and compromise in all environments.

Alexander Hamilton was not the best listener early in his career. He was quick to express his opinion often before hearing the other side of a discussion. This tendency was noticed by colleagues as exemplified by Aaron Burr’s character, who advises Hamilton to “talk less, smile more.” Similarly, faculty members who lack listening skills when discussing topics with colleagues could be perceived as unapproachable or lacking collegiality. If those in leadership roles express their views overtly, then contrasting opinions and academic discussion can be inhibited.

In contrast to Alexander Hamilton’s undue haste, President George Washington demonstrated the effectiveness of active listening skills during the “cabinet battles” in the musical. Individuals on each side of an important topic were given time to present their case while the president listened without interrupting. He made a decision only after hearing both sides of an issue. This format fostered discussion and debate, valued differing opinions, and ultimately contributed to the early success of our country. Throughout their career, faculty members should strive to find a balance between quick, opinion-based decisions, which are sometimes necessary to respond to an urgent need, and decisions where listening and learning from others would be of greater value.

Self-Reflection and Compromise: “Non-stop” to “The Room Where It Happens”

In academia, faculty members need self-awareness and humility in order to be successful in their careers. As a young officer with direct access to George Washington, Hamilton viewed himself as a rising star and was arrogant in his interactions with others as depicted in the musical number “Non-stop.” Hamilton’s arrogance and lack of self-awareness initially inhibited his success as Secretary of the Treasury because others were put off by his attitude.

Over time, however, Hamilton acknowledged these deficiencies and worked to overcome them. One of the turning points in Hamilton’s career development was when he was working to create a national banking system but lacked the necessary votes to get his bill ratified by Congress. When confronted with this difficult reality, Hamilton was able to “open doors that were previously closed” by reflecting on his actions and humbly approaching Jefferson to resolve their conflict.

The historic compromise between Hamilton and Jefferson depicted in the musical resulted in the creation of a national bank and established the location of our national capital. Similarly, all academicians will face situations that necessitate compromise and negotiation, whether it be over curriculum, resources, budgets, or time. Compromise requires careful listening, self-reflection, and possibly conceding valued positions in order to achieve common ground. In the musical, despite disagreeing and personally disliking each other, these two founding fathers compromised and negotiated on high-stakes issues in order to move the country forward. Similarly, faculty members and those in academic leadership roles may need to do the same to grow and further their programs and careers.

Patience: “Wait for It”

Hamilton is a flawed character in many ways, especially because of his impulsiveness and inability to consider the repercussions of his actions. Working nonstop led to professional advantages for Hamilton but created difficulties in his life. In contrast, Aaron Burr described himself as someone willing to wait for the perfect time and opportunity. Although the musical depicts this as a negative characteristic, Burr demonstrates patience in leadership. In the song, “Wait for It,” Burr sings, “I am the one thing in life I can control” and “I’m willing to wait for it,” which are useful observations for faculty members who are considering an administrative or leadership role. Goals should be carefully reflected upon in regard to career planning and timing. Being willing to “wait for it” will help ensure professional and personal success by pursuing the right career opportunities.

Prioritizing: “Take a Break”

Hamilton had a very difficult time saying no when asked to take on new responsibilities. As a result, he worked unceasingly, to the point that it led to many conflicts in his personal life. His wife, Eliza, pleads with Hamilton to “Take a Break” to join them upstate for the summer and he repeatedly focuses on his need to work on his plan for Congress. Like Hamilton, it is tempting for academics to overextend themselves. A common struggle

in their academic career is how and when to say no without incurring consequences. This can be especially difficult for junior faculty members who may require coaching to learn how to strategically prioritize their efforts toward reaching a well-planned career goal over tasks that may prove to be a distraction. It is important to identify those service opportunities that best align with personal and professional goals, while balancing these goals with institutional needs when possible. Being willing to say no at the right time can help to ensure professional and personal success.

Demonstrating Empathy: “They Are Going Through the Unimaginable”

One of the more emotion-evoking songs in the musical is “It’s Quiet Uptown,” with one line stating “he is going through the unimaginable” after the Hamilton’s suffer the sudden loss of their oldest son. While the objective of the song is to remind others to be sympathetic towards the Hamilton family, it is a good reminder of the importance of empathy. Demonstrating empathy is an important skill for leaders to acquire and develop.

An empathetic administrative team increases rapport and improves communication channels with faculty and staff members in the work environment. Similarly, an empathetic leader is more approachable by those who may be struggling. For example, when an academic leader is considering the reasons for a decline in a faculty member’s performance, failure to demonstrate empathy could cause further deterioration in the effort made by and morale of the faculty member. In contrast, approaching the situation with empathy and support could encourage that faculty member, leading to increased productivity and loyalty to the organization. A myriad of personal issues, from marital problems to a serious illness, can affect a person’s professional performance. Starting difficult conversations with a question such as, “I’m concerned about you. Are you doing okay?” may serve as the opening for a supportive discussion. Leaders must be empathetic to the struggles and challenges faced by others in order to run a healthy organization.

Tending Relationships: “You’ll be Back” and “I Know Him”

One of the most important lessons told to pharmacy students is that pharmacy is “a small world,” and this is especially true within academia. The “I know him” network can be a powerful incentive or disincentive when someone is being considered for a job, especially a leadership role. Furthermore, sometimes a new position does not work out or an administrator decides to return to faculty status. Thus, it is important for academicians to

tend to all relationships throughout the trajectory of their career, as these connections may influence that next position, or smooth the transitioning out of a leadership position.

Approaching Difficult Decisions: “The Election of 1800”

Difficult and unpopular decisions are commonly a part of every leader’s job. In the musical’s version of the election of 1800, Hamilton was faced with deciding which one of his two biggest rivals would be candidates for President of the United States. Hamilton approached this decision by staying true to his moral and ethical code. Though he “never agreed with Jefferson once,” he admired Jefferson’s strong beliefs and values. In contrast, he repeatedly challenged Burr throughout the musical, at one point asking, “If you stand for nothing then what do you fall for?” Neither of the candidates seemed a good choice to Hamilton, but he used his values and guiding principles to make the least bad choice between his two biggest rivals.

As admissions numbers and budgets decrease, academic pharmacy leaders will be faced with many difficult decisions that have no good answer. In those situations, it is imperative to reflect upon the decision-making process and try to predict the repercussions of each difficult choice. Many of the previous discussion points, such as finding strong mentors and listening to all opinions, are sound advice when facing these challenges, but it is vital for a leader to stand by their own guiding principles and ethics while considering alternatives that would not compromise their values.

Knowing When to Say Goodbye (or Move On): “One Last Time”

One of the most poignant lessons in our national history is the concept of a peaceful transition of power and succession planning. After being elected to two presidential terms, Washington decided to step down solely because he believed it was in the best interest of the country to have someone else lead the next phase.

Like Washington, administrators will eventually reach a time when they consider moving on, returning to faculty status, or retiring. The introspection and self-awareness of knowing when it is time to step away (because the leader has accomplished his or her goals, believes the time is right, or is being recruited for a new opportunity) is invaluable in serving an institution. It can also occur suddenly, which makes mentoring and succession planning important responsibilities of a leader. Administrations should be continually investing resources into cultivating potential successors and be cognizant of how well prepared an institution is for unexpected leadership changes.

Managing a Legacy: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”

It is vital to identify what is truly important in one’s life. The closing song, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” is a recap of Hamilton’s greatest accomplishments as told from the viewpoints of various people. Jefferson and Madison marvel at Hamilton’s foresight and creation of an ironclad financial system. After Hamilton’s death, they agree that Hamilton did not get the credit deserved for his accomplishments, yet they did nothing to publicize or rectify Hamilton’s legacy. The song continues, but the direction shifts from Hamilton’s foes and colleagues to the perspective of his wife, Eliza, and she is the one that tells her husband’s story of struggle, determination, and perseverance.

No one is perfect, including Hamilton, who occasionally made decisions that betrayed his core values. Yet his response, ability to learn from his mistakes, and capacity to ask for forgiveness ultimately redeemed him. Leaders will make mistakes, and it is often the ability to correct and learn from errors that determine success and how they are remembered professionally. However, ultimately, it is the personal relationships that are cultivated over a lifetime that sustain and ensure our lasting legacies.

CONCLUSION

Winston Churchill famously opined that “those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Looking at the experiences of the founding fathers, a similar sentiment could be made regarding leadership. The life of Alexander Hamilton demonstrated this well, be it historical or written with historical license. Many of the situations and personalities encountered by our founding fathers, including maximizing opportunities, listening, self-awareness, compromise, being patient, empathetic, prioritization, tending relationships, approaching difficult decisions, knowing when to say goodbye, and managing a legacy are still applicable within organizations of today. Furthermore, they are especially applicable in this time of crisis for pharmacy education and throughout the nation and world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can take advantage of our technologies, medical advances, and leadership experiences to meet and overcome these obstacles. One final message from the musical *Hamilton* that seems especially appropriate is to “look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now.”

REFERENCES

1. Miranda L. *Hamilton: An American Musical* [MP3]. New York: Atlantic Records. 2015.