

Learning to manage in health

Briana NL Geelen-Baass

“I’M A MRP” is the grammatically incorrect response I offer anyone who asks the ever popular “What do you do?” question. The error in the statement may be understood when you realise that the acronym stands for an inanimate entity: Management Residency Program. Despite the struggle I have with the inherent clumsiness of the phrase, I am actually quite happy to use the term. I feel comforted by the idea of having an identity. I think this comes from my former life as a Prosthetist/Orthotist (P&O). As a P&O, you have an identity. Regardless of where you are working, you are a P&O and this is interesting in itself. It’s a great conversation piece. Now that I attempt to make the move into management, I find myself placing greater importance on *where* I am rather than *what* I am. It now matters more to me which organisation I belong to. I’d like to attribute this to an academic theory such as Henry Mintzberg’s, which would suggest that my focus is changing from a professional orientation to an organisational one.¹ However, I realise there is a slight possibility that the title “health manager” is actually just boring. I know lawyers who find themselves in the same predicament. As soon as they say, “I’m a lawyer”, conversation comes to a screeching halt.

So what does it mean to be a MRP? As a MRP I am allowed the unique experience of flouncing in and out of organisations like a vagrant non-employee. It’s like trying on organisations to see which ones fit. Four organisations in two years, to be exact; one of which being the beast that is the

Victorian Department of Human Services. Sure, you find yourself heading face first toward the deep end, but at the same time you’re protected by some sort of MRP-shaped floaties. It might just be the safety blanket afforded by low expectation. Meaning, because we’re not actually employed under normal job titles, our supervisors — or preceptors — don’t have an expectation of what we *should* be able to do. Therefore, we’re able to learn to ride the management bike at our own pace with the comfort of training wheels.

Now that I’ve made the MRP sound like a risk-free, padded playpen with rounded corners, believe me, quite the contrary is true. On the other side of the coin is the feeling that I’ve been thrown in a talent show but someone forgot to tell me what my talent is. You see, there are three other MRPs also in their final year of the program and any minute now the four of us will be desperately vying for the same positions. And while we walk around with polite smiles on our faces chirping “It’s not a competition and everyone has their place in the world”, I’m starting to think I’ll be less convinced of that when one of us is sitting in executive meetings while I’m calling a price-check to aisle nine.

The other point that swerves away from the safety blanket view of the MRP, and more towards the running-around-with-pointy-scissors-on-the-freeway-after-dark end of the spectrum, is the fact that we suddenly find ourselves in the company of some rather important people. These people are the sort of people to whom you could offer your most intelligent comment — the one you’ve been composing in your head for months — and still look like you have a complete absence of cerebral elegance by comparison. In the presence of these people your level of inadequacy stares

Briana NL Geelen-Baass, BPO, GradCertHlthPolMgmt, MHA, AFCHSE, CHE, Business Coordinator
Ambulatory Services, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre,
Melbourne, VIC.

Correspondence: Briana NL Geelen-Baass, Ambulatory
Services, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, Locked Bag 1
A Beckett Street, East Melbourne, VIC 8006.

Briana.GeelenBaass@petermac.org

This paper was completed while the author was a student at
La Trobe University, Australia.

you in the face with just a tad too much honesty and clarity.

It's impossible to convey the thrill of getting to meet so many fascinating people. I love people. I love to find out what makes them tick, and what ticks them off. More specifically, I love meeting people for whom, within seconds of meeting, I find myself donning a chippy style tool belt in order to construct their metaphorical pedestal. The thing about pedestals is the malleability of these whimsical structures. The builder has the fickle, yet complete, control over the height and solidity of the creation, as if the integrity of the structure was proportionate to the builder's current perception of the lodger's integrity. The other notable aspect of this pedestal debacle is the inability of the lodger to predict which attributes elevated them to pedestal status in the first place. My hypothesis is that infallibility is surprisingly not a prerequisite.

Being in the MRP severely ups your chances of rubbing shoulders with pedestal folk. In fact, quite recently, while on one of my placements, I met a rather brilliant chap who was promptly mounted on a pedestal of his own. I often wonder how the pedestal folk feel about their metaphorical structures. Does their pedestal actually weight them down like a ball and chain? Or are they oblivious to this abstract, and indeed idiosyncratic, structure of elevation?

As a star struck MRP stumbling through a star-infested playground, it suddenly becomes apparent that this is the perfect fertile environment for acquiring mentors. That's the latest fad for generation X and Y's: mentor acquisition. It's a bit like collecting Barbie dolls; these days, having one is not enough. When you're in the MRP, you get assigned one for the duration of the program. Beyond the specific advice the mentor offers you, what you discover is the very notion that some of these phenomenal people will actually sit down and answer your questions. That never ceases to amaze me. For people like this, the resource that is most precious to them is time; and yet they will share that very gem with you for no apparent gain. It's the greatest gift that could be presented, and yet, there is no form of counter-offer that

comes near to being adequate. Much the same as Barbies, there is a mentor for every occasion. There is one for practical advice; there is one just to listen; and there is the one who tells it like it is. The lesson is simple: if you find someone who is willing to play this role for you, latch on to them, because you will not find another resource that contains what they can offer.

One of the many pieces of advice one mentor offered me is that "Not all steps up the career ladder are for the best; be careful what opportunities you accept." I subsequently discussed this with a colleague who added:

The ladder metaphor is awesome, but I always viewed my career progression as one of those weird flat escalators you get at airports: not much upwards trajectory and even though it's an easy ride, it goes frustratingly slowly.

The MRP is actually like neither of these metaphors. It's more like a two-year cocoon of radical growth and reinvention. You go in one end as a certain type of creature, then emerge something completely different. It occurs to me that the professional evolution of any person can be just as awkward as adolescence; but the MRP seems to magnify the peaks and troughs — or at least put them on display in front of the aforementioned *important people*. This can be confronting, but I can't think of a better way to learn about yourself and the way you operate.

In my opinion, this learning seems to occur in four stages throughout a MRP's two-year evolution marked by the four placements.

- *Phase 1*: "Wet behind the ears" doesn't even begin to describe the nature of a newborn MRP. Sure, you may have established yourself in your previous environment, but in this new world of health management, you know nothing. The good thing is you know you know nothing, and you just have to hope to God that no one else expects you to know something. Thankfully, you adapt very quickly by adopting the MRP primary defence mechanism: smile and nod, then when no one's looking, make a desperate beeline for Google. You also take a look around

you at the other MRPs and realise that any strengths you thought you had have just become par for the course. With the bar raised, you are left wondering what you might have to offer to get over the bar once again.

- *Phase 2:* By now you're starting to get the hang of things. You've learned the ancient art of networking and are guided by the MRP proverb: if it moves, network with it. You've acquired a few mentors, which seems to not only have the benefit of expanding your knowledge but also your level of confidence. Some things are starting to make sense and fall into place. However, it still feels like learning a second language, as the data that come into your head have to be translated before you can slot them into the right pigeonhole. You are far from being dry behind the ears but you've developed several tools that seem to be smoothing the ride.
- *Phase 3:* The jigsaw is really taking shape now. You no longer have to translate things in your head. Your thoughts are configured in the same way as the information that is coming in. The new you is emerging and it is giving you the euphoric sense that anything is possible.
- *Phase 4:* The euphoria you felt is easing to allow some room for a little reality. You realise that in Phase 3 you might have been biting off a little more than you could chew — at least, more than you could chew with elegance. In Phase 4 three things are happening simultaneously. Firstly, you find yourself trying to cram in every possible experience you can think of, because you know that next year you'll be constrained by the usual barriers of a job description. Secondly, you become acutely

aware of the imminent unemployment situation. As a result, your life becomes like one big D&D* ball. Every person you meet becomes a potential target. You start to consider the relative evils of begging and bribery. Finally, you do a stocktake and realise that you know yourself a lot better than you did in Phase 1. You're pleasantly surprised that you do actually have strengths that will help you get over that bar. You also know that you still have large gaps in your knowledge, but you now have the tools to develop, or even reinvent, yourself every time the bar gets raised. Beyond that, and possibly the most exciting discovery of all, is having the confidence to go and grab the bar yourself and define how high you want to go.

Henry Chester apparently said "Enthusiasm is the greatest asset in the world. It beats money, power and influence". Throughout the Management Residency Program, it often feels as if enthusiasm is the only currency available to us. Many of the tools that we acquired through our undergraduate education, particularly those of us with a clinical background, cease to be applicable in this environment. But we most certainly have an abundance of enthusiasm. With any luck, this asset, along with our understanding of life on the shop floor, will stand us in good stead for the future. Although, I daresay a few of us wouldn't mind to one day trade in some of our plentiful enthusiasm chips for a couple of those subordinate assets that Chester mentions.

Reference

- 1 Glouberman S, Mintzberg H. Managing the care of health and the cure of disease - Part 1: Differentiation. *Health Care Manage Rev* 2001; 26: 56-69. □

*D&D = Desperate and Dateless