

How Can We Inspire the Next Generation of Optometrists to Lead?

Allergan recognizes the important role women eye care practitioners play within the optometric and ophthalmic communities. Visionary Insights for Eye Care Women—VIEW—is an initiative established by Allergan that is dedicated to supporting and promoting women optometrists and ophthalmologists.

This article marks the first in a series that will appear in *Advanced Ocular Care*, its sister publication, *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*, and its online publication, *MillennialEYE* (www.millennialeye.com).

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A key characteristic of any good leader is motivation, with a dash of inspiration, a spoonful of patience, and a boatload of organization. These are all skills most women already have—and I am a firm believer that leadership skills can be learned (or honed). There are also different types of leadership experiences, some more appropriate at different times across a woman's professional career and family life. Every female optometrist already is and can be a (better) leader.

In most volunteer organizations, there are plenty of leadership roles that involve taking on individual projects. From experience, most busy women know that if you want the job done, doing it yourself is often the easiest way! There are always smaller projects that contribute significantly to the mission of the organization. Also, the blessing (and curse) of leadership is a job well done, because good work always gets noticed. The great thing is that women can take on small roles that fit within the time constraints of their professional and family life. Once bit by the bug, it is often hard to say no. A diversified blend of both professional and personal activities can be very rewarding.

Leadership traits can be spotted early. Take a look around at the next meeting you attend and reach out to any students you might come across. Young leaders often start getting involved postgraduation at the local optometry society level. Again, there is never a lack of volunteer positions, so those of you out there who have an interest, reach out! Be encouraged to just ask how to get involved, even if you have only a small amount of time to give.

Getting involved in leadership is a two-way process with one thing in common—communication. If you are early in your career and you would like to get involved, do not be afraid to contact those who may have connections. There are so many great women role models in leadership positions in optometry, and I am sure each would take the time to discuss leadership with you. On the flip side, it only takes a minute to recognize a job well

done, by any of our female colleagues: young optometrists or the not as young ones (careful on the wording ladies!).

We all could do a better job at reaching out to tell a colleague we appreciate her efforts. A few words of encouragement can recharge the batteries, and you just do not know what might come out of it. Rest assured, however, it will be rewarding.

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To create the next generation of leaders, current leaders must connect with those women who are new in the profession who have the desire and passion to lead. It is important for young optometrists entering the field to be made aware of the history of optometry, including laws that have been designed to restrict optometry's scope of practice. It is critical to learn to network with and engage legislators so that optometrists can continue to be a trusted and valuable resource to lawmakers, particularly as they make policy decisions related to health care. Just as the scope of the optometric profession has changed, so has the profile of students entering optometry. Both less experienced and seasoned optometrists should engage each other and create mentoring relationships beneficial to both parties and the profession in general. There is much to be taught and learned from all generations of optometrists.

Women in particular benefit from mentoring relationships that are designed for them to chart their course into the ranks of leadership in professional groups, legislative groups, research, education, and industry. Current leaders can inspire new leaders by leading with integrity and setting an example. Inspiring the next generation of women to lead begins with getting to know who they are and what they need. Once the barriers of gender, age, race, and culture are overcome, road maps can be

established for the next generation to follow. It starts with students. Optometrists can consider allowing new professionals to shadow them in their office; the adage “reach one teach one” comes to mind.

The summer before I started optometry school, I asked a practicing optometrist if I could shadow him during the summer months. I observed his interactions with patients, staff, pharmaceutical representatives, politicians, businesspeople, and community leaders. It was a valuable experience that provided me with insights that I could not have learned in school or paid for. I am sure at times I slowed him down, but he was making a contribution to the profession by providing me exposure and devoting time in mentoring me and developing my leadership skills.

While a Kellogg Leadership Fellow, I was able to travel around the world observing and asking different women how they developed their leadership skills. The overriding response was that they learned to lead through an education that set the foundation for their needed confidence. The more they learned, the more confident they felt in their roles. This process of education contributed to their enthusiasm and desire to set the course on their lives’ experiences.

We have a responsibility to connect with and nurture the next generation of women (and men) optometrists, and develop strong leaders to continue to forward our profession.

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The first step in encouraging the next generation of women optometrists to take on leadership roles in the profession is for the current generation to tell the story of why it is important to get involved. The second step is for women optometrists to lead by example, and the third is to encourage women to “lean in” and do something that scares them.

When individuals go outside of their comfort zones, they become more confident and stronger by conquering what they might have feared. Mentors will find that

they get back more than they were asked to give. When women see other women in leadership roles, they believe they can do the same thing.

There are different ways in which women optometrists can be involved in the profession. They can be speakers, lecturers, and deliver continuing education to their colleagues. They can be in academic leadership positions: there are more female deans and college presidents today than there were 10 years ago. Women professionals can also be involved in the advocacy front, like I was. No one is going to protect our profession except us, and no one else cares about our profession the way we do. If we want it to remain a great profession, then it is up to us to take care of it.

When I graduated from optometry school, the class was about 15% women. When I got out of my residency and was setting up my practice, various experiences motivated me to get involved with making a difference in the optometric profession. I became angry with a medical colleague who treated me dismissively, and I was upset about being made to feel like a subordinate.

It was at that point that I became involved with state-level legislative politics. At first, I was terrified—particularly of public speaking. Now, talking in front of a room of 500 people is no problem. I experienced the personal gratification of having expanded my palate and going outside my comfort zone.

Women share more with other women and are more comfortable in settings where they can tell their stories, network, and bond.

There are many opportunities available to women in optometry if they choose to pursue them. The career can be as exciting as one makes it. There are myriad specialties: if a woman wants a dry eye practice, she can have a one. If she wants a pediatric practice, the opportunities exist, particularly in the setting of health care reform, when more kids will now have access to care. I recently received an email from a woman who is a fourth-year optometry student. She asked me if she should consider a rotation in low vision or vision therapy. There are so many places for optometrists to take their careers.

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