

MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY: THE CONSUMMATE LEADER

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If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more,
do more and become more, you are a leader. — John Quincy Adams

The editors of the *Journal of the Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center* have asked to me to share with you some of my recollections on how Dr. DeBakey accomplished all he did in his lifetime. I have no special understanding of the genius of Dr. DeBakey's medical management style and effectiveness. However, I was an avid student and ardent admirer of his and can share some of my observations of his unique ability to evaluate and assess people and situations, his methods of leadership, and his ability to influence the views and work efforts of those with whom he came in contact. During my student, residency, and faculty years, I took notes on what I thought of as the "DeBakey Processes and Tactics." I hoped that I could incorporate at least some of what I observed into my own approach to leadership and management.

Appropriately, no high praise has been spared in describing the many visions, inventions, and contributions of Dr. Michael E. DeBakey. He and many who have memorialized him have cited the firm and sustaining foundation provided by his family, education, faith, and basic moral principles instilled early in his life. Accepting the essential importance of these foundations

and recognizing they have been widely written about, this tribute will focus on Dr. DeBakey's many management approaches.

Two philosophies are the underpinnings of the "DeBakey management style." All of his trainees have heard these stimulating charges multiple times:

- "Attention to detail at all times"
- "Pursue excellence in all things"

These basic philosophies were coupled with an incomparable personal discipline that he himself possessed and demanded in others.

A Winning Team (Personnel Management)

From childhood, Dr. DeBakey was taught to seek out information and learn from all resources around him. He read voraciously from his early youth, and at Tulane he sought out the best faculty, the disciplined university orchestra, and those doing quality biomedical research, Drs. Rudolph Matas and Alton Ochsner. He later sought out the most productive surgical researchers in Europe to determine their latest approaches to the growing repertoire of operative procedures. While in the U.S. Army, he assembled a team to tabulate essential data and develop approaches to both strategic and logistic surgical needs of the military.

Those inherent and well-developed reflexes of finding, assessing, encouraging, inspiring, and managing Type A personality leaders were well ingrained in Dr. DeBakey when he came to Houston in 1948. He first sought out the core team from among existing surgical educators and quickly added those adept in clinical and basic research, medical writing, and surgical education. He trained and recruited young faculty who became the surgical leaders for the next six decades. Dr. DeBakey had an uncanny ability to assess the base traits and inherent abilities in the men and women he recognized were needed to meet the challenges of the new frontiers in health care delivery and surgical approaches to vascular and cardiac disease. He then stimulated them to excel far beyond their initial expectations of themselves.

Resources: Maximize and Expand

No leader ever possesses all of the resources, personnel, finances, or venues desired or required to accomplish a vision. Dr. DeBakey recognized such limitations in the days when imaging capabilities, materials, sutures, instruments, and even concepts were not sufficient for what was needed in cardiac and vascular surgery. He used exist-

ing resources to the fullest, and when a special tray, prosthesis, or tissue interface did not exist, he either improvised, invented something new, or assisted/facilitated one or more of his team in doing the same. Such an approach was developed for vascular imaging, vascular spring clamps, specialized needle holders, and even grafts. Today many of these innovations bear Michael DeBakey's name. Innovation coupled with imagination and determination characterized his approach to limited or lacking resources.

Alliances

Dr. DeBakey understood that alliances are necessary for success, and when he came to Houston, building alliances among the medical schools, political community, local hospitals, local benefactors, Houston business community, and regional academic centers was essential for success. Although he is best known for his many early educational and clinical contributions, his networking throughout the community was unprecedented and undoubtedly integral not only to his long-term successes but also to those of Baylor and others involved in alliances — with many of these early networking “investments” not fully reaching maturity until decades later. This brings to mind another of Dr. DeBakey's fascinating traits: his ability to see far into the future with great accuracy. To a large extent, I think this was due to his vast knowledge of history coupled with his extraordinary powers of observation. He continued to build alliances throughout his life, even at 99 years of age. The alliances among Baylor College of Medicine, The Methodist Hospital, Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Harris County Hospital District, Houston Independent School District,

Business Communities of Houston, the legal community of Houston, Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, every U.S. president since Roosevelt, many international political leaders, U.S. Army, Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences, Lasker Foundation, NASA, multiple professional societies and organizations, and many professional scientific journals are some of the partnerships that can be traced directly back to Dr. Michael E. DeBakey. He interacted with many individuals affiliated with these organizations on a daily basis throughout his life, interspersed between his operating, reading, writing, research, teaching, and traveling. How many hours were in his day, you ask? Obviously, the same 24 hours you and I share, but his personal discipline made all things possible. He defined “multitasking” long before the term even existed. That his accomplishments were so many and so varied is quite enough to impress beyond words, but that he did so much without ever appearing to be rushed, stressed, or pressed for time was ever a source of amazement.

Expect and Support Responsibility, Authority, Discipline & Leadership

Although Dr. DeBakey had a much-deserved reputation for expecting a great deal from those who worked with him, a management trait that has received very little emphasis was his ability and willingness to delegate significant responsibility and authority to his subordinates. This singular ability resulted in his grooming, empowering, and then recognizing a great many master surgeons who fostered their own secondary research, education, patient care, service, and leadership. As his “associates” who

worked with him on complex cases and developed new approaches in the laboratory built practices of their own, new junior associates were recruited. Although there has and always will be rivalry among surgeons, under the direction of Dr. DeBakey there was also a healthy respect and support for the development of new and collaborative programs by the many members of the Department of Surgery and throughout the medical school. I cannot give a name to the trait nor can I explain how it worked, but Dr. DeBakey inspired in his team a sense of intense loyalty to him and all he stood for, the likes of which I have never seen anywhere else. I believe our loyalty was based on profound respect for the man, the surgeon, and the teacher.

At the affiliated hospitals, Dr. DeBakey would either allow or assign a junior faculty to develop the surgical programs and provide the moral and economic support to make that program successful. He appointed four different chiefs of surgery to the Ben Taub General Hospital, and two of them remained in their respective position for more than 25 years. His skills in recruiting, mentoring, motivating and supporting the leaders that he selected may be the most important aspects of Dr. DeBakey's unique management style. Interestingly (and surprisingly to many), this was a “hands-off” style — never constant supervision or “smothering” but, rather, an unspoken and completely confident expectation personified by personal, professional, and program discipline.

Zero Tolerance

From the time surgical trainees were medical students at Baylor, they were inculcated with a principle of zero tolerance. They learned that though the price of imprecision in some fields of medicine

might be less than devastating to a patient, the price of imprecision in cardiac and vascular surgery was death, a major loss of organs and function, or a major neurologic event. Such complications were simply unacceptable. Zero tolerance also applied to maintaining medical records, meeting deadlines, constructing sentences for a report, starting a conference on time, and all other areas of our profession — attention to detail in all things and personal discipline always. “Outsiders” saw these expectations as a “command and control” management style, but those training and working with Dr. DeBakey recognized that he demanded and expected nothing more of others than he did of himself, that in making these demands he inspired us to heights we would not have achieved on our own, and, most importantly, that the welfare of the patient was his driving force and must be ours if we were to become master surgeons, medical leaders, and role models for the profession.

Analyze and Report Results

The surgical scientist is always looking for “a better way,” and that was a DeBakey trait all of his life. One way of improving methods and techniques was to collect, tabulate, and analyze what had been done before. From his earliest days in writing scientific papers, long before the days of electronic automated searches for prior reports, he constructed colossal literature reviews with record numbers of personally reviewed clinical cases on a particular subject. Some reports exceeded 50 pages, with more than 1,000 literature citations. These manually tabulated collected reports predated the computer spreadsheets with built-in statistical analysis programs and entailed hours of detailed “pen to paper” data analysis. They depended on

Dr. DeBakey’s analytical mind, which never failed to successfully integrate all his concurrent and historic sources of data.

Seek Continuous Improvements

Dr. DeBakey was involved in total quality improvement long before it was an industrial managerial tool. He could be seen in the operating room adjusting length and angles of clamps. In the conference room and in educational sessions, he would discuss a clinical or technical approach to a specific condition with the goal of developing a “better way.” Changes to vascular grafts involved crimping, altering woven to knitted characteristics, adding velour to first the inside and later to the outside of the product, and finally adding albumen and collagen to the graft, all to improve short- and long-term patency and to decrease complications. He thought like an engineer, never satisfied with the first or current design, always re-evaluating, applying new products, new formulations, and new applications to a concept, organization, product or process.

Have the Courage to Fail and Learn from Failures

It takes an innovative, persistent, and confident leader to maintain the courage to move forward in spite of overwhelming odds and even, at times, failure. Without the courage to fail, a surgeon would never make advances in patient care or develop new approaches to the treatment of diseases. Dr. DeBakey demonstrated his courage when he concomitantly completed portions of college and medical school at Tulane University, when he conceived a new process of forward surgical care in the war zone using the MASH units, and when he left the security of Tulane to become the first chair of surgery at Baylor College of Medicine, at

the time a new, fledgling medical school. The potential for failure at each of these junctures in his life (and many others) was a fact, but his courage carried him forward, and his attention to detail and pursuit of excellence brought him success. He boldly explored the retroperitoneum to replace a dilated abdominal aorta when no other surgeon in the Western hemisphere had dared attempt this feat. He initiated scientific experiments with new plastic fabrics as a potentially viable vascular substitute conduit. He evaluated new concepts of post-operative care in a new location, the Surgical ICU. He evaluated new concepts and designs of instruments, cardiac valves, and vascular conduits. He designed and evaluated various approaches to cardiac assist devices. With these and many other endeavors, he demonstrated a willingness, indeed, a passion to fearlessly go into territory that others dared not enter.

Patient Examination Room

While teaching rounds always seemed hectic to the residents, the moment Dr. DeBakey entered a patient’s room, having just received the essential information from the accompanying “floor” resident, the patient had the complete and focused attention of Dr. DeBakey. He always touched the patient, listened to the heart, and felt the abdomen and peripheral pulses, all the while listening attentively to the patient and any accompanying family, conveying the essential information, including day and type of surgery or date of hospital discharge. All of this was achieved in just over one minute per patient, although, had you asked any of his patients, they would have assured you Dr. DeBakey spent hours with them during his hospital visits.

Operating Room

In the operating, or, rather, simultaneous rooms, when he and his teams were operating, Dr. DeBakey always performed the essential parts of the operation. While always true, it was especially in the operating room that he demanded exacting focus and participation of those around him and did not tolerate anything less. During one long, demanding operation, Dr. DeBakey asked me if I was “mesmerized,” and assigned me to do research on this word. I obediently complied and learned a Viennese physician, Dr. Franz Anon Mesmer, was a magician and hypnotist who “spell bound” his spectators. Henceforth, I always attempted to be an active participant in the OR with Dr. DeBakey rather than a “mesmerized” observer!

Dr. DeBakey was technically equally adept on both sides of the operating table. There was no question that he was the singular “master of the ship.” Every member of the operating team timed his/her movements to his starting, proceeding, and concluding the operation. He was always acutely aware of all activity and movement (or occasional misadventures) of any member of the OR team during a procedure.

Patient Rounds

I never knew Dr. DeBakey’s schedule not to be exceedingly busy. His patient rounds were the greatest example of business organization and efficiency I have ever seen. At times, there were hundreds of patients in the intensive care unit, on the various hospital patient floors, in the off-site preoperative annex, and in the preoperative area. Rounds, sometimes twice a day, were wedged among operations, teaching, research, interacting with visitors and dignitaries, travels, reading, and writing. All patient

X-rays and the office charts were kept in the inner office, where once a day Dr. DeBakey, the surgical associates, the consultants, residents, and visitors gathered around Dr. DeBakey and the view box. The patient list was “run” as charts and X-rays appeared in front of Dr. DeBakey (with his red and #2 pencils in hand). Records and reports on every preoperative patient were reviewed as well as those of most postoperative patients. Essential lab data and consultant’s opinions were communicated. Neither a moment nor an excessive word was wasted. Floor rounds of all patients would follow, most often with the team taking the stairs because the elevators were too slow. These clinically detailed rounds were the epitome of time management and efficiency.

Research Laboratory

During my years at Baylor (1960-2008), I rarely saw Dr. DeBakey in the research laboratories longer than a few moments to communicate an idea, a modification, a direction, or a concern to the technologists, engineers, or surgeons assigned to this location. For Dr. DeBakey, the research arenas were everywhere, not just the formal laboratory. Research was driven because of clinical need, and he was modifying his research protocols all the time. Innovative visions were a constant of the interstices of his mental labyrinth. To him, the research laboratory was the integration of well-orchestrated multitasking.

Lecture Hall

Dr. DeBakey loved to teach. His demanding schedule did not allow for extensive classroom sessions, and his teaching style varied with the teaching venue. Just as when he was with a patient, students in the lecture hall had his full and

focused attention. In this venue, his voice was often soft and his “slides” were not particularly new, but he was completely captivating. Having been familiarized with the term and having on more than one occasion been in such an audience, I can confidently say that Dr. DeBakey had the ability to “mesmerize” his audience. He brought immediate respect into the lecture hall, and everyone was honored to spend the learning hour with this articulate, historic teacher. He gave the basics of his subject matter, these basics most often concepts, ideas, advances, and techniques of his own development. His talks were not flamboyant or statistically complicated. His simple fundamental teaching style inspired generations of students at all levels. His detail and level of educational sophistication was always commensurate with the level of the student’s ability to comprehend the details of his subject matter.

Writing Papers, Letters, Testimony, Reports

Dr. DeBakey was an excellent writer; his command of the English language (as well as French) was exceptional. His recollections of articles read, lectures heard, and even day-to-day conversations throughout his lifetime were almost perfect. He was able to integrate his own data with articles from the distant past and recently derived new information. He said he usually did his reading and writing late at night, and always with a lined legal pad nearby for taking notes. He often remembered and used complex words from his distant past and ones not often used by medical scientists. When colleagues and subordinates would send him a paper to co-author for review, it would often come back with extensive red correction marks and always accompanied by appro-

priate additional references, often with copies of those same references.

Recruitment Session

Dr. DeBakey did not spend much time in actual recruiting. I think he knew well in advance what type of individual he needed for his team. He did groundwork beforehand on potential candidates, and then let that individual know there was an opportunity awaiting him/her at Baylor College of Medicine. He also would let the prospective student, resident, faculty know that he was interested in positioning them to allow maximum potential for accomplishing their career goals. This direct approach to recruiting was effective and did not take much time with salary and benefits discussions. Job descriptions were often not specifically spelled out or detailed, but the resident or faculty did the work expected of them, and most were also overachievers.

Fundraising

The Texas Medical Center is full of buildings, projects, programs, and endowed chairs that Dr. DeBakey contributed to personally or helped endow through fundraising. His style was simple and effective. In his own inimitable way, he eloquently shared his vision — whether a needed treatment, a new educational need, or the need for a new building, device, or instrument — while pointing out not only the economic barriers to making these visions a reality but also the great benefits that would ensue for patients and society in general. At black-tie affairs, he never targeted a particular contributor but cited past successes and current research in the course of social and cultural progress. It was amazing to watch the simple yet uniquely effective style, again inspiring support.

Board Room

I have observed Dr. DeBakey in board, department, and committee meetings, as chairman, moderator, and member. As a chair or moderator, he always started meetings on time, adhered to the agenda, respected all members, assured closure on issues, and often successfully concluded meetings early. As a board or committee member, he respectfully listened to discussions. Often, after everyone had input, the chair would turn to Dr. DeBakey and ask his opinion, at which time he would respond, “It seems to me that this matter can be simplified and approached from...” and give a perspective and solution that left all in the room wondering, “Why didn’t I think of that?” Closure would then quickly be reached. In this environment, Dr. DeBakey had the unique ability to quickly grasp the full concept and focus on the key issues, bringing all along with him to a defining conclusion.

Before Congress, NIH, FDA, or Presidents

For almost 70 years, Dr. DeBakey was an advisor to many government leaders, including presidents and kings. His interactions were one-on-one and before congressional and NIH/FDA committees. Prior to any such encounter, he always did the required homework, preparing himself with data to support his testimony, comments, and/or vision. He did not always obtain the specific funding or concept development he was proposing, but without doubt he did get his views across to those listening. He very effectively testified before policymaking groups with regard to treatment of patients with major abdominal and vascular injury, development of Medicare, development

of regionalized specialized health care centers, development of cardiac assist devices, development of specialized “magnet” high schools, funding for medical school and GME education, regulations to separate medical devices from pharmaceuticals at the FDA, development of NIH, development of the Library of Medicine, support for the Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences, and many others. His quick analytical mind and ability to communicate effectively and so convincingly always served him (and the world) well in these situations.

In summary, I had the opportunity to watch and learn from the many different applications of Dr. DeBakey’s management style in many different venues over the years. I do not believe he learned these adaptations in any special class or school. I seriously doubt he ever thought about or analyzed his “management style.” It was his own approach to life, his own way of achieving his goals, that inspired, in the truest sense of the word, all with whom he chose to share his professional life.

Dr. DeBakey’s unique management talents significantly contributed to his ability to so greatly impact medical education, research, patient care, policy, and community leadership. Because his management style was a reflection of his character, unique abilities, and innovative visions, it will never be duplicated. If, however, each of us who knew and appreciated his management techniques can adopt just a few of them, then our students, residents, medicine, and indeed the world will be all the better for it.