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Reflections of a new CEO

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Someone I had come to know well in this industry called me when I was appointed CEO in April 2020 and wished me Congratulations and Condolences. It felt like an honest thing for him to say, and for me to hear, in the moment. It was not an easy time to be stepping in as CEO and I certainly had questions about whether I was ready to take on what I was being asked, and *trusted*, to do. From that point forward I reminded myself it is the latter that has always fueled me – the feeling of responsibility that comes when an individual, a team, a company, a mission is entrusted to your leadership. I strive every day to earn that trust. Here are some things that have helped me along the way...

Early Lessons Stick

I learned my earliest leadership lessons from my dad, who showed me through example that leadership is a privilege. That you should spend more time focused on earning the trust of those who work for and beside you than worrying about what those above you think. That when you agree to lead, you give up the right to have a bad day. That it's your job to make sure everyone understands how their work contributes to the mission, so they feel like they are part of something larger than

themselves. That when asked to do a job, you should focus on doing that job to the very best of your ability - and when the next opportunity comes, you should do the same. He approached his military career in this way and went on to reach the height of his profession; a job well done, a lesson well taught.

Every time I questioned whether I was ready to be CEO, I reminded myself that while it had never been my goal, I had prepared the best I could by treating every job along the journey as the most important. Every time I reflected on how to do the job better, I called to mind many of those other lessons.

Hard Earned Habits Endure

As a freshman or “plebe” at West Point, you are allowed 4 responses only: “Yes Sir/Ma’am,” “No Sir/Ma’am,” “Sir/Ma’am, I do not understand,” and “No Excuse, Sir/Ma’am.” This is intentionally extreme, and the last one sends the clearest message. Picture this – you walk across campus during a thunderstorm to get to your next class and are stopped by a female upperclassman upon arrival and asked why your shoes aren’t appropriately shined. The answer? “No excuse, Ma’am.” You see, while there may be clear logic for why you failed to meet the expectation, it simply doesn’t matter. You either meet the expectation or you don’t. The lesson? Find a way; take accountability when you don’t.

Over the last year we had plenty of opportunities for excuse making. We chose accountability. We walked through some rain, but together we found a way.

There were many moments this past year when I started to feel doubt creep in, and I reflected on my first long rucksack march as a plebe. I was tired and in pain only a mile in, knowing we had more than 10 to go. It had become psychological; I knew it but couldn’t shake it. An upper classman walked up beside me and said, “One foot in front of the other, New Cadet Dempsey. Just one step at a time.” He probably didn’t realize the impact that had, but I truly boiled the rest of the march down to a single step.

Sometimes success is simply a matter of grit, of putting one foot in front of the other – and having someone come up beside you with a word of encouragement. This past year, our team demonstrated a ton of grit and shared a lot of encouragement.

The Power of Empathy

Speaking of words of encouragement, the way the PGDx team rallies together and takes care of each other is what makes this job so rewarding. I recently had lunch with our Lab Operations team, and when the leader of that team opened the floor with, “You have the CEO here, what questions do you have?” Danielle Jones spoke first and said, “How is your family?” It stopped me in my tracks momentarily, the idea that of all the things she could have asked, she demonstrated care first for me as a human being. That day, it was her leadership that shined and served as an important reminder.

While the past year was full of unprecedented challenges and offered no rule book to follow, it also taught us tremendous lessons about compassion. We got to know details of each other’s lives in a more authentic way than perhaps ever before, as they unfolded in the background of a Teams meeting. We cared about what was happening with each other outside of work as much as inside

work – in part because it all became one. It is up to each of us to ensure these lessons live long beyond the pandemic.

Advice Can Come from Anywhere...If You Let It

As a mom, one of my biggest worries has always been finding this elusive thing called work-life balance. Over time I have begun to see it as an effort around integration more than balance. Involving my three young sons in why I care so much about my job (the mission, the team) and in the good, the bad, the exciting, and the scary this past year was the best part of the experience. What inspired me most was the love, support, and advice – yes, advice – I received from them. You want help through a difficult situation? Pose a question to a 7-year-old. They will answer with such honesty, curiosity, simplicity and optimism. I will never forget some of those moments.

The Goal That Matters

I never aspired to be a CEO. What I have always aspired to do is make an impact with a mission that matters. I believe deeply in our mission at PGDx, and I am so grateful to be working with an amazing group of people to fulfill it. We have a saying, “Be in the Arena,” a reminder of my favorite quote by Theodore Roosevelt. An excerpt goes like this: “It’s not the critic who counts; the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly, who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause.”

Our cause is worthy - democratizing access to genomic profiling tests that enable precision medicine for patients battling cancer. Every one of us has a personal story for why we do it. We won’t get there without failures, but of this I am sure - we will remain in the Arena, always.