

Presentation to Management Forum: Lessons Learned

I would like to thank the members of the organizing committee for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on Life-Long learning. When I was asked to share my story, I was humbled to think my career experiences may be of interest to others.

And then the decision, which career do I start with? Perhaps some information about my

He explained that it was a live-in position. He said that I would be responsible for the quality of life of the 266 students living in RVC during the academic year. I would provide support and leadership to the team of seven upper-year dons, the front-line resource people for the primarily first-year students living in RVC. He said he had approached me because he had heard that I wo

My nursing background provided me with many skills that were very useful to me as I assumed this new administrative position. Nursing taught me so much: organizational, priority-setting and decision-making skills to name just a few. I needed all of them and more as I walked up the hill to an empty office in Bishop Mountain Hall more than twenty-eight years ago.

As I was preparing for this presentation and reflecting back on how I felt and what got me through those early days and years, I realized that what helped me most was just being myself and listening to the people already working there who knew more about the issues than I did. Just because my title had changed from Nurse to Director, I was still the same person; I was still Flo. The values and priorities that were important to me such as respect, equality, tolerance, fairness, listening with an open mind, hearing two sides, compromise and caring, were still important to me in my new position. They would frame my management style for the next twenty-eight years.

That being said, I had a lot to learn – about everything – when I became Director of Residences. My year as Acting Warden had given me a bird’s eye view of the McGill residence system but I really did not know what I was getting into. Had I known, I would never have had the confidence to apply. I did have the support of my superiors, which was critical. My predecessor had been Acting Director for a year; he was confrontational and not too popular, so luckily, the staff welcomed a change. Obviously, I did something right in those early days and years or I would not have lasted over twenty-eight years as Director. So another lesson I learned, in hindsight, is that you have to take risks, push comfort levels, and test yourself if you want to realize your potential.

I was fortunate to have a wonderful mentor in those early years. Professor John Southin was Director of McConnell Hall when I arrived in Residences. He had lived in Residences for many years and had even served as Director of Residences for a brief period. Although I had been working at the McGill Health Services for thirteen years, I had limited knowledge of the larger McGill organization, campus, and community. As many of you know, the McGill workplace can be very political. All this was new to me. John helped me understand the broader picture and coached me on many occasions. I remember telling him about one meeting where I felt attacked on a few fronts. He said “don’t worry, Flo, the dogs may bark but the caravan keeps on rolling.” I have repeated that to myself on more than a few occasions over the years.

John is but one example of the many wonderful people from whom I have learned so much. To learn from others, you must be ready to listen carefully, to accept the opinions and ideas of others, you must be willing and able to be self-reflective and self-critical, and you must be prepared to change your mind.

When you are in a leadership position, and every manager is, you are automatically viewed as a role model and in a perfect position to be a mentor for others. You may never know the impact that you or your style of leadership will have on others. I have frequently been named as a “mentor” and “role model” by the student leaders and junior staff that I have worked with. However, it took me by surprise that when news of my

retirement spread, I received some quite positive feedback about my leadership style from staff across campus with whom I had had minimal direct interactions.

I have previously mentioned that I consulted with and listened to those around me when I first started as Director. Although I was not aware of it at the time, this process of consulting with and listening to those I work with quite unconsciously developed into one of my management strengths. My staff have told me how much they appreciated being heard, having the opportunity to have input into the decision-making process. Again, another lesson learned quite by accident.

McGill Residences is quite a unique department on campus. For the eight months of the academic year we are primarily a “home away from home” for the 2700 first-year students who live in our buildings. We are a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week operation year-round. From May 15

on the task than the roadblocks you are encountering in completing that task. I also managed by consensus as much as possible. The most important element of my management style was that I cared about what I was doing, how I was doing it, and the people involved.

Working with the students and staff in McGill Residences has been a wonderful experience for me. Not a day went by where I did not learn something from one of my staff or students. I'll close by passing on what I think makes a successful and competent leader: Respect is key. Keeping respect in the forefront as you manage and make decisions will earn you the respect of others. You must be authentic and consistent; people will trust you and know what to expect from you. And I believe you have to