
Changing the Culture

Some Reflections on Randy Arnett's Leadership Style

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January 1, 2020

Introduction

Everyone who was working at SOMC when Randy was appointed CEO and is still here would agree that the SOMC organizational culture has changed dramatically during his tenure. It is a much better place to work and serve. SOMC is one of the best places to work in the world, and we can prove that. SOMC is one of the safest and highest-quality hospitals in America, and we can prove that, too. Some of our patient satisfaction scores are among the best in the nation, and we are hard at work, continuously improving all of them. SOMC team members, physicians, and advanced practitioners are among the most engaged in the nation. Many of our physicians and advanced practitioners are highly regarded as respectful team players. Bullies no longer roam free. Disruptive behavior in the workplace has dramatically decreased. If such behavior does occur, the perpetrators are promptly called to account. Our colleagues are always looking for a better way to serve our patients, their families, and each other. SOMC is the only major healthcare provider in the neighborhood to have been consistently profitable for more than 30 consecutive years. This is just the shortlist.

Now, Randy would be the first to admit he didn't accomplish this all by himself, but with his easy-going leadership behaviors he set a new tone and clarified different expectations for how leaders ought to and ought not to behave.

He recruited and retained fellow leaders who shared his vision and, most importantly, supported them when they made the tough, unpopular decisions required to change the organizational culture and sustain those changes. Beneath that genuine nice guy front lived a fierce competitor who wanted to build the best for his hometown, and he was willing to do what it took to accomplish this goal.

On the occasion of Randy's retirement, and to celebrate his many years of service to our community, this SOMC white paper intends to capture and reflect on some of his effective leadership behaviors and to document

them for future SOMC leaders. Randy might not have actually articulated the leadership principles that follow, but his behavior said these things loud and clear.

Be Nice

A lot of leaders, particularly CEOs, see being nice as a weakness. Bullies and jerks make it to the highest levels of our society and organizations with alarming frequency. To make matters worse, these bad actors are often lionized by the business press and encouraged by their many sycophants whose mission in life is to achieve a similar position of power where they can abuse their underlings in the same ways. The toxic workplaces these miscreants create and sustain contribute to the profound lack of engagement most of us have in our work, but this pattern of negative leadership stubbornly persists.

Randy followed a succession of such leaders at SOMC, and he decided to take a different approach. Instead of yelling, cursing, and threatening to fire people, he listened and asked questions. Instead of barking orders, Randy invited stakeholders to educate him. He readily acknowledged he was not the expert in many of the clinical issues that arose. Still, he was confident that an atmosphere of mutual respect and good humor would be more likely to result in the best decision. Favoring the management-by-walking-around (MBWA) style, he was out and about every day. His easy-going demeanor and engaging laughter made Randy eminently approachable.

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Predisposed to being agreeable, those who knew him best would often joke that when he reprimanded someone in his office, they usually left thinking they had been promoted.

Be the Best

Randy inherited an organization with an inferiority complex in a town with an even bigger one. When someone complained about a problem or suggested we make more of ourselves, the standard refrain was, “This is Portsmouth, what can you expect?” His first executive team was severely infected with this limiting disease.

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Randy didn't buy it. One of his favorite stories was he would know he had succeeded when SOMC employees stopped taking their name tags off before shopping in Kroger. He listened to the executive naysayers for a while, but eventually decided to bet on the leaders who believed SOMC could be the best rural healthcare system. He wanted leaders who were eager to stop explaining why we could not and start showing how we could instead. In what was his greatest single act of exceptional leadership, he informed the Board he was going to replace the executive naysayers and offered his resignation if the Board would not support him. What SOMC has become since then is, in large measure, the result of this courageous act of leadership. Because of Randy's courage, Ben Gill will inherit a very different executive team. No naysayers remain. Instead, every executive is passionately committed to lead SOMC to the next level. We can be better. We must. And we will.

Stay Put

Executive turnover in healthcare is the norm. This is how many executives measure their success. Take an executive position, spend a few years padding your resume, and move on up. While this is obviously the best way

to acquire more money and power, it is not the best way to change organizational culture. Those people who are getting the real work done every day understand that the organizational priorities will change with the next CEO who blows in to make her mark.

Randy and his fellow executives had many opportunities to move on to more prestigious positions with higher pay and bigger perks. Randy decided to stay at SOMC and make a difference here instead. He understood that changing organizational culture and sustaining that change would require time and energy. When leaders are focused on the next rung of the ladder, they are less inclined to tackle the hard stuff. Let the next leader deal with that. But some things take 30 years to change.

Field the Best-Possible Team

Everyone agrees this is a good idea—until it affects them. Leaders are legends in their own minds. Athletes understand they cannot continue on the team unless they add value and produce exceptional results. Leaders rarely take this view. Once having acquired a leadership position, leaders usually view the job as a right. Moreover, they believe they are now entitled to keep on moving up, despite their poor performance.

Randy was an exceptional athlete in his former life. He understood you could not expect to win unless you were willing to field the best possible team, despite how people felt. He viewed this obligation as his moral duty to SOMC and the community. During his tenure, he cut several executives from the team. The extruded executives didn't like it. Their friends didn't like it. And Randy didn't like doing it. But this is the price effective leaders must pay. Good intentions are not enough. Real leaders do what needs to be done. Randy did.

View the Best Idea as Boss

All organizations have hierarchies, and they often get in the way. Bigwigs are tempted to think their ideas and opinions are just naturally better. This delusion is augmented by the hesitancy people naturally feel to disagree with the boss. But the truth is executives almost never know what is really going on at the front line of the organizations they lead, nor do they recognize their pet ideas usually have little relevance to the people actually doing the work.

Randy understood that the best ideas usually emerge in front-line teams, that lasting change is bottom-up, and not top-down. Because of this, instead of viewing the boss' idea as best, Randy always viewed the best idea as boss. He welcomed dissent and constructive conflict. He changed his mind quickly when someone made a better case. He often took the devil's advocate position when someone came up with a new idea, but this encouraged healthy debate instead of limiting it because he was so quick to abandon his position and embrace the better idea when it surfaced. He often remarked that "I'm not the brightest bulb in the box," to encourage everyone to speak their minds.

Sleep on It

When people are emotionally aroused, they are strongly inclined to make impulsive decisions and indulge in misguided behavior. Executives

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are especially prone to making this mistake. They believe making decisions and acting on them quickly and decisively is their job. It's not. Making the best decision is.

Randy recognized that the executive's job is to ask the right questions, identify the real problems, explore the available options, choose the best ones, implement them, and evaluate the outcomes. This process demands reflection and deliberation. And it takes time. Issues that look perfectly clear when first considered often appear entirely different after a good night's sleep has rebooted the decision-makers' brains. The decision to "sleep on it" is also one of the best antidotes to groupthink.

Decide and Move On

Rumination is a common mental affliction among leaders who hate to make mistakes. With the clarity of hindsight, it's easy to feel stupid and to second guess oneself. Such painful and distracting rumination can make

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leaders so cautious that they experience paralysis by analysis, determined to make sure that they never make a wrong decision again.

The only way to avoid ever making a bad decision is to make no decisions at all. The best way to manage a bad decision is to admit it and make a better one. Randy was among the very best at this. When he made a decision, he was done with it until circumstances demanded a reconsideration. Then, he reconsidered, consulted stakeholders, made another decision, and moved on again.

Put the Team First

Executives want to be viewed as capable and decisive. This need convinces immature leaders to make impulsive and unilateral decisions—because they can. And those who are trying to get their way want them to do just that. Not surprisingly, all sorts of people sought private meetings with Randy in an attempt to persuade him to make a decision in their favor while excluding those who might disagree or expose their selfishness.

Randy figured this out right away. He would listen carefully and promise to take the petitioner's issue to the team. Most remarkably, when he slipped and made an impulsive decision before consulting the team, he would reverse himself when that was warranted. It's hard to overstate the positive impact this brilliant leadership tactic had on the former SOMC culture where the "friends" of the CEO were used to meeting privately with him and getting their way at the expense of other stakeholders. Randy believed "the team's the thing," and everyone at SOMC eventually figured out he really meant it.

Welcome Disagreement

Conflict is uncomfortable. Most leaders at SOMC avoid it as long as possible. When reminded that successful leaders run toward organizational fires, many leaders admit that they prefer to run away instead. Because leaders avoid conflict, they often lack the skills they need to manage conflict successfully. No one enjoys conflict, even when it is managed expertly. Randy was no exception. Remember, Randy is the quintessential nice guy. Almost everyone who meets him likes him. But when a difficult issue needed to be addressed, Randy wanted to hear everyone's opinion, even those opinions he opposed. He understood that unresolved conflict is much worse for leaders and organizations than the temporary discomfort occasioned by its deliberate and expeditious resolution.

Embrace Discomfort

Every leader gives lip service to the importance of teamwork, diversity, constructive debate, and employee empowerment. But the reality in most organizations is very different. People long for security. They are afraid to rock the boat. They don't want to be criticized. They want to do what they feel like doing. People don't like change and resist the discomfort it brings. Up and down the chain, people tell others what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear. The comforting and stultifying status quo is hard to resist. Some measure of success makes matters even worse. Leaders are loathed to change what once worked, even when it no longer does. And nothing fails like success.

But Randy understood the only way to grow is to create and embrace discomfort. He consistently supported energizing discomfort and opposed paralyzing discomfort during his tenure as CEO. On announcing the transition, he created more discomfort.

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When Randy invited the executive team to recommend his successor, he said something both uncomfortable and profound. It was not something anyone wanted to hear or believe. He said he was reasonably sure that SOMC needed a different kind of leader than he had been to help our SOMC teams take themselves to the next level. This is a very unusual thing for a successful leader to say. This wise insight is counsel that the next generation should consider carefully. What got us here almost certainly will not get us there.

Make a Compelling Case

All organizational leaders are continuously engaged in selling and being sold something. Dedicated salespeople are skilled in using the brain's preference for taking shortcuts to close the sale without regard for the buyer's or the organization's best interests. Determined sellers favor one-sided arguments

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and impulsive decisions over skepticism and constructive dissent. This is not the way to create an organizational culture of thoughtful deliberation and appropriate decision-making. Randy supported a better way to make organizational decisions. He believed that anyone who wanted to sell an idea or product should not make a sales pitch but take the skeptic's view instead. He believed the stakeholders and a group of dispassionate leaders should be involved in important decisions as well. This approach eventually changed the culture from sellers making a private, one-sided case to a key decision-maker, to requiring sellers to behave like discriminating buyers. This new requirement to make compelling cases annoyed the manipulators and emboldened the skeptics. And this was just what Randy wanted.

Block for Your Runners

Those leaders who are trying to change and improve an organizational culture can depend on some stiff opposition from those who like things the way they are, and these courageous leaders will need some serious

and sustained support from the CEO and the executives if they are to have a prayer of success. One of the reasons that only 13-percent of workers are engaged in their jobs is the lack of executive support for making things better for anyone but themselves.

Since most of the executives played sports seriously earlier in their lives, because sports is one of the principal entertainments in Portsmouth, and because so many SOMC team members are sports fans, sports analogies were used to explain just about everything at SOMC. Randy used this football analogy to effectively communicate his intention to fully support the people who were struggling to move the ball upfield. And he was the best at this. Never once did Randy fail to support those leaders who were doing the right things. We could all count on him to block for us. Randy was the best blocker SOMC has ever seen.

Focus on Strengths

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. The best any of us can hope for is that when our lives are summed up, our strengths will have outweighed our shortcomings. Many leaders are primarily focused on their colleagues' weaknesses with the intention of turning those weaknesses into strengths. It's not going to happen. The failure to focus on strengths instead of weaknesses is leadership malpractice.

Randy saw this clearly. If a leader had a significantly impairing weakness, he addressed that, of course. But for those leaders who were net-positive, he focused on helping them build on their strengths. The ROI for the time and energy investing in augmenting one's strengths is much better than the return for the same investment in trying to perfect one's weakness. He looked to his team members to compensate for his own leadership weaknesses—he was the first to admit them—and he encouraged all leaders to take the same approach.

Ask the Right Questions

Leaders want answers, and we want them now. This misguided longing to avoid the discomfort of uncertainty inclines many leaders to skip the essential step in the decision-making process—asking the right questions.

In contrast to his sunny disposition when he was out and about, Randy almost always immediately went to the dark side of every issue in private. Those who joined the executive team, having only seen his public persona, were always shocked by this. We executives kidded him mercilessly about his instinctive cynicism. He admitted it and laughed at himself. But his dependable glass-half-empty, pessimistic approach to nearly everything served an invaluable tempering function for our team of (mostly) optimists. His jaded perceptions forced the rest of us to consider the questions we would otherwise never have thought to ask. We all grudgingly admitted his perceptions were probably more representative of what people believed than ours were. This helped the team manage everyone's perceptions more effectively.

Reject the Sense of Entitlement

Bigwigs often get big heads. Give a human a little power, and the temptation to abuse that power will soon appear. Many leaders fall into this trap. Most fallen leaders never see their mistake. Their sense of entitlement

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blinds them to the fact that they have become jerks and that the people they are supposed to serve resent them because of it. The

comforting delusion that you are something special and deserve to be treated that way is nearly impossible to shake after you have embraced it. Worse still, the suck-ups reinforce this delusion. Finally, entitled leaders behave this way because they can get away with it.

Finally, he made it clear to every SOMC leader that he would support them in holding the bullies accountable no matter who they were. And he did.

Randy took the road less traveled. He wanted everyone to call him Randy. He didn't have a special parking place. He parked at the off-site lot and rode the bus to work just like the rest of us. He even drove the bus occasionally! He picked up trash on the way in and out of the building and while making daily rounds. He served the employees at the Christmas Buffet and walked lost visitors to their destinations. When he saw a spill, he grabbed a mop. He made fun of his fellow CEOs and their "suspenders-snapping." His humility contributed to his approachability and likability. That, and the fact that he was apparently related to everyone in town, or so they claimed.

Restrain the Bullies

The business literature suggests that a good many workplaces are still terrorized by abusive bullies. SOMC certainly was when Randy took over. Doctors intimidated nurses, and nurses lorded it over their underlings. Nursing leaders often lamented that "nurses eat their young." Temper tantrums were frequent, expected, and accepted. The executives themselves were among the worse offenders.

There was a lot of yelling and cursing. One of my first tasks, when I was elected Chief of Staff many years ago, was to deal with a surgeon who had slapped a patient.

Randy set out to change this. He began by behaving like a gentleman himself. He started dealing with the executive bullies next. First, he made his expectations clear. Executives would behave as respectful team players, or they would leave the team, no matter their tenure or political connections. Next, he delivered on his commitment when executives did not believe he was serious. This changed the organizational tone. Finally, he made it clear to every SOMC leader that he would support them in holding the bullies accountable no matter who they were. And he did. Slowly, our servant leaders began to believe him. Over the years, the bullies left or changed their behavior. Randy and the next generation of leaders know full well the bully-wannabes are still lying-in-wait out there, hoping for a sign of executive weakness. Randy set an example for aspiring executives to follow. Don't tolerate bullies. Ever.

Keep a Sense of Humor

We are engaged in serious, noble work at SOMC. But the best of human nature cannot flower in an environment that is always serious. Laughter, as the saying goes, is the best medicine.

Randy loves to laugh and make others laugh. We laughed a lot during his time as CEO, sometimes inappropriately so. We called it medical humor. Humor is a double-edged sword, most often employed as someone else's expense. We all sometimes got ourselves into trouble when we thought we were off-stage when we were really on-stage. It's hard to ever be off-stage in Portsmouth. We've all counseled ourselves and each other to be more cautious with our attempts at humor, but with Randy also being the Chief Comedy Officer, we have decided to use humor more circumspectly,

not give it up altogether. We have not got this critical leadership skill exactly right yet, and I doubt we ever will, but we are determined to preserve the unfettered joy that Randy's humor gave the team after he is gone.



Conclusion

This has been some run. Those of us who got to serve some or all of the time Randy led SOMC will always regard ourselves as incredibly lucky. Most people never get the chance to serve

on such a high-performing executive team. They can only dream. We lived the dream.

Thank you, Randy.

Some Additional Executive Team Perspectives

What a wonderful reflection of Randy's influence on SOMC's culture! I, too, believe I am truly fortunate to have served with Randy. I am grateful to have been a part of the executive team over this amazing run. Thank you, Randy, for being the catalyst that changed SOMC from just OK happening here to very good things happening here. The transformation is clearly recognized by anyone in our community who has been here over that last three decades. Thank you, Randy.

Dean Wray, MBA
Chief Financial Officer

Thank you, Randy, for being the head coach for the culture we experience today. I joined SOMC shortly after you started in the CEO role, so I do not have some of the comparisons to the state of our culture before that time that my colleagues would have. But over the past 27 years, I have been witness to all of the leadership behaviors described on the previous pages as a front-line employee, a manager, and as a part of your executive team. One of your leadership strengths I appreciate the most is the fact that you expect that we truly make TEAM decisions. You expect that any issue or decision that will impact the SOMC team or our culture be brought to our executive team meetings to discuss and make a team decision. And once we have made a team decision, we stick together. You have never allowed our team to be divided. Only that kind of leadership blocking, through your example, will allow us to become the BEST. Thank you for the privilege of being able to serve with you on this journey, Randy.

Vicki Noel, MLHR, SHRM-SCP, SPHR
Chief Human Relations Officer

I started at SOMC in 1978 and, during my first decade, I survived several leadership styles. I had no idea the dramatic change we were facing as my second decade really kicked into full swing. A young CEO was hired, and he began building (and rebuilding) a new kind of team. Before long, we had in place a unique and creative leadership team that set the stage for everything that has happened since that time. Doors were opened for staff and frontline employees to be heard, and their ideas were no longer pushed back and ignored. They were invited to share their opinions, become team members and "make a real difference" in an environment where patients were always first, but everyone else mattered, too. Service was no longer a dirty word. I stayed at SOMC because I wanted to make a difference, and I wanted to be a part of this unique environment. Randy Arnett led this change and I thank him for being innovative enough to try a new leadership style and lead SOMC to the place we are today. I consider myself one of the most fortunate ones because I was here when he walked in, and I'm here to see him off, knowing that he succeeded. SOMC is most definitely a better place and "Very Good Things ARE Happening Here." One of my favorite stories goes back quite a few years to when smoking was still allowed on campus. Randy was leaving one day and saw one of the ashtray containers on fire. Instead of coming in and asking someone else to handle it, he ran in and grabbed a bottle of water. He took the water and put the fire out himself. I followed him and took a picture. I knew that day that we were in the midst of building a new culture.

Jerri L. Lewis CPMSM
Medical Staff Credentials Manager

Another area that has been essential to Southern Ohio Medical Center's transformation has been Randy's relationship with the Board of Directors. Much of this work is done behind the scenes. Because Randy is hesitant to take credit we hear very little about this critical contribution and sometimes underestimate its importance. He and the Chairman have worked throughout Randy's career to assemble a group of individuals who have supported some incredibly difficult decisions. Their support often resulted in political blowback, but they offered it anyway. They did it because they believed and trusted Randy when he told them it was the best thing for the organization and for those we serve. That belief and trust were not earned overnight. It was the result of his unique ability to consistently anticipate and address their concerns. He communicated with them regularly and rarely, if ever, allowed them to be surprised. Because of his efforts, he and his team were granted wide berth to make the necessary—though sometimes unpopular—decisions required to give us the culture and the organization we currently enjoy.

Ben Gill, MBA
Chief Operating Officer

What a great description of Randy's leadership style and his positive influence on the transformation of SOMC's culture. It has been a privilege and honor to be able to work and serve with him over the past 29 years. Randy has been a great mentor and leader. He has a fantastic ability to connect with people. Many staff comment on how he always takes time to ask about their spouse, children and their activities. I will never forget one of his guiding principles when looking at a patient care situation, "How would you want your mother treated?" This has helped guide me as we work to support SOMC's mission to "make a difference." Randy, you have left a legacy that those of us who remain after your retirement intend to continue as we adapt to the numerous changes in healthcare. Thank you, Randy, for your 29 years of leadership and guidance.

**Claudia Burchett, MBA, BSN,
RN, FACHE, NEA-BC**
Chief Nursing Officer

Randy has shown us how to build a high performing team. He was unwilling to accept that we could only do so much in Portsmouth, Ohio, and relentlessly focused on making SOMC the best rural hospital in the nation. His skill at selecting talented team members who shared his vision that SOMC could be the best is unmatched and Randy's blocking for his team so we could focus on the things that matter most made him an incredible coach. SOMC has grown to more than 3000 employees and providers, and the amazing culture of the organization is confirmed through high employee and provider engagement and satisfaction. The growth of technology and specialty services is witnessed through the comprehensive list of programs and services now offered right here in our region. SOMC's focus on perfection is validated by awards from distinguished external sources. SOMC has become an extraordinary patient-centered hospital, economic force, and huge community supporter. SOMC's many accomplishments go hand in hand with Randy's compassionate, servant, and team focused leadership style.

Randy, thank you for your 29 years of service to SOMC and for pushing us to make SOMC the best. It has been a pleasure learning from you over the last 10 years of my career, and I look forward to what our team can accomplish in the future by building on the foundation that you and your team have worked so hard to establish for us.

Kara Redoutey, MBA, CPME
Chief Quality Officer