

Vanessa Abejuela-Matt Interview

1. What is the best piece of leadership advice you've ever received?

"Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence."-Harvard Business School definition of leadership

I found this definition while reading the book Lean In a few years ago. It really changed my perspective on how to take the lead in my own career. In order to achieve my goals, I found I couldn't just shape my personal views and actions but that I had to make an impact on the environment I was working in, whether it was in my personal, alor philanthropic life.

2. If you could go back in time, what is one piece of leadership advice you would give your future self?

Be involved. Advocate for the change you want. It's always easier to let someone else do the work, but I have found that I feel most engaged and satisfied in the work I'm involved in when I am actively guiding what it becomes.

3. What is one leadership experience, situation, or scenario that you've experienced that you wish everyone in family medicine (students, residents, physicians) could experience?

I had the great experience of being able to work with one of my dear friends, Dr. Stephanie Glod, as a co-chief in residency and as a partner in clinic after graduation. It's a rare experience to be able to work with such a close friend (and to stay friends after so many long days and nights). Our closeness allowed us to be very constructive with one another since we really understood each other's values and goals. It kept us accountable. It was also just fun. We probably had more laughing than was appropriate came from a doctor's office, but as they say, laughter is the best medicine!

4. Who are your mentors and what did you learn from them to become the physician/leader that you are today?

My parents instilled a sense of community and purpose from me at an early age. One of my earliest volunteering memories was serving (occasionally eating) cookies at our local USO. When there is a need, go serve. This is something that I've applied to all aspects of my life, whether with a friend in need or a problem to be solved in clinic operations.

My physician mentors have been Dr. Rambha Bhatia and Dr. Janice Litza, who were attendings during my residency. They both were examples of great compassion for patients and resiliency as working women and leaders in a field where women's voices are not as loud for various reasons.

5. Why did you choose family medicine and what's your favorite aspect of it?

I was drawn to family medicine because of the close relationships that are built as a primary physician. This is still my favorite aspect of it, even on the days when patients use their phones for show and tell of bodily fluids. You only share photos of your stool with people you trust.

6. What does leadership mean to you?

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7. What is the most memorable experience you have had when dealing with a patient?

Where to begin... I tend to remember the R version of work rather than the Disney moments. I'll refrain from offending any readers.

8. What qualities make a great leader in family medicine? How have you taken these qualities into your practice and community outreach?

Open-mindedness, resiliency and collaboration. Family medicine is an inherently team-based practice, whether it comes to working with colleagues or patients. So much is achieved when you make the most of each person's talents and skill-sets. It's easy to see this in work when working with colleagues, but with patients, they know their lives, their resources better than anyone. Medicine is no longer a paternalistic endeavor. I encourage them to use the information I give during visits and adapt it to their lives; essentially to be the leaders in their own health.

In regards to community outreach, I've been very lucky to serve as a board member for United Way-Racine. We have a board from all walks of life because to serve a community, you have to see the community from all views. United Way-Racine has been so successful in helping to transform a community that was plagued by inaccessibility to education and employment opportunities is because of their ability to capitalize on the strengths of the engaged people that make up the community.

9. Who or what inspired you to pursue family medicine?

I have always been drawn to helping others and wanted to make the most of my skill set, which was an interest in biology and being able to communicate with others. There are days, I scratch my head at the newest developments, but being able to empathize and educate in an accessible way has gotten me far as a physician.

10. What piece of advice would you give to your younger self? To a medical student interested in, or a new family medicine resident?

For myself, see above General Interview Question #2

For a medical student or resident,

Be humble. It's something we can all use, whatever stage we are in our careers. There is always more to learn from the every situation and person-knowledge is ever growing. Humility is also something that I hope has helped my patients to trust

me as well. I try to admit when I don't know something and that I'm no patient's boss, but I'm always an advocate for the well-being of patients.

... And to quote one of my favorite former attendings, Dr. Brian Wallace, "Always use a bigger needle."