

Loyalty in Medical Explorer Leadership

A Foundation of Trust, Service, and Organizational Integrity

Leadership Is a Commitment

Leadership in a university organization is more than holding an office, attending meetings, or having authority over a particular activity.

Leadership is a commitment. When an individual accepts a leadership position, that person accepts a responsibility to the organization, its mission, its members, and the other leaders with whom they serve.

One of the most important—and sometimes least discussed—elements of that responsibility is **loyalty**.

In business, healthcare, universities, nonprofit organizations, public service, and other professional settings, effective organizations depend upon leaders who can trust one another. Skills and intelligence are important, but an organization whose leaders cannot trust one another will eventually struggle regardless of how talented those individuals may be.

Loyalty therefore should not be viewed as an old-fashioned virtue. It's an essential component of organizational effectiveness; even our Omega Leo Medical Explorers.

What Does Loyalty Mean?

In a professional organization, loyalty means remaining faithful to the responsibilities and commitments one has voluntarily accepted.

A loyal leader supports the mission of the organization, protects its legitimate interests, treats fellow leaders fairly, maintains appropriate confidentiality, fulfills commitments, and places organizational responsibilities above personal recognition or advantage.

But loyalty must be properly understood.

Loyalty does not mean blind obedience.

A loyal officer does not have to agree with every decision made by the president, executive council, faculty advisor, or other leaders. Healthy organizations require disagreement. Leaders should ask difficult questions, challenge assumptions, identify risks, and propose alternatives. Open communication among leaders is important, even when a student leader may need to discuss a direction a faculty advisor may want to take. The faculty advisor will value your contribution, but they need an opportunity to explain their ideas and bring student officers along. A faculty advisor may be taking a “strategic” perspective involving ideas where student officers may not see the results before they graduate and move on to their professional schools. Even faculty advisors value the suggestions and input of current student leaders, and can probably either slow down or modify ideas for growth and improvement after hearing suggestions from student officers. Communication of everyone’s views is what makes everyone a better leader. Communication is a two-way street. “Loyalty” to the organization is what ties everyone together.

Sometimes a decision may have to be made with little or no input. That’s OK, but should not be abused. All leaders at all levels may find themselves in such a situation, but that’s why they are a leader. They are trusted to make a decision that is in the best “long-term” interests of the organization and its members. But if that decision is questioned, that leader

should be allowed an opportunity to explain. The problem occurs when that decision may be lead to unanswered objections and complaints by other members or leaders creating a festering wound among the leadership team. If that happens, an executive leader may need to step in and take the initiative to “come to a meeting of the minds.” Good leaders resolve disputes before they are allowed to have negative impacts upon the organization.

In fact, sometimes the most loyal person in the room is the person willing to say, “I think we are making a mistake, and here is why.”

Professional leaders disagree honestly and respectfully within the organization’s decision-making process. They present evidence, listen to opposing views, and participate in reaching a decision.

Once a legitimate decision has been made, however, leaders normally have a responsibility to help the organization carry it out—even when their preferred alternative was not selected.

Debate before the decision. Commitment after the decision.

Loyalty to the Mission Before Loyalty to a Person

Perhaps the most important distinction in organizational loyalty is understanding what deserves our loyalty.

A university organization’s officers should not be expected to pledge personal loyalty to another officer. Their first loyalty should be to the organization’s mission, values, membership, governing documents, and legitimate purposes.

American history provides an early illustration of institutional leadership. On December 23, 1783, George Washington voluntarily resigned his commission as commander in chief of the Continental Army and returned authority to Congress. After serving two terms as the nation's first president, he also chose not to seek another term. These actions became enduring examples of the principle that an institution should be larger than the individual who temporarily leads it. [1–2]

The organization or institution should be larger than the individual who temporarily leads it.

That lesson applies equally well to a university organization. Presidents change. Officers graduate. Advisors eventually retire. Members come and go. The institution continues.

Therefore, responsible leaders should constantly ask, “What is best for the organization and the people we serve?” rather than, “What is best for me?”

Loyalty Creates Trust

Trust is one of the most valuable forms of organizational capital.

Leadership teams function effectively when their members believe they can depend upon one another. An officer should be able to assign a responsibility to another officer and reasonably expect that it will be completed. Leaders should be able to discuss difficult organizational problems without immediately worrying that incomplete conversations will become rumors.

When trust is strong, organizations can move quickly. When trust disappears, everything becomes more difficult.

Leaders begin protecting themselves. Information is withheld. Meetings become political. People begin documenting conversations primarily to defend themselves rather than to accomplish the mission. Informal factions develop. Decisions become increasingly difficult. Eventually, talented people may simply leave.

This is why loyalty has practical organizational value. It creates an environment in which leaders can concentrate their energy on accomplishing the mission instead of protecting themselves from one another.

Loyalty and Confidentiality

Leadership frequently brings access to information that ordinary members do not yet possess. An officer may learn about personnel concerns, disciplinary matters, financial problems, negotiations with another organization, safety issues, or preliminary plans that have not been finalized.

Access to information creates responsibility.

A leader should understand the difference between transparency and confidentiality. Transparency means that an organization should appropriately communicate its decisions, finances, policies, and activities to its members. Confidentiality means recognizing that some information must be protected because of privacy, safety, legal requirements, ethical obligations, or the need for leaders to deliberate before making a final decision.

Sharing confidential leadership discussions for personal advantage, entertainment, gossip, or factional politics damages trust.

Confidentiality may involve personal discussions about organization activities or direction. Our Medical Explorers cooperate with many external organizations, Any officer, but especially our liaisons with these external groups, may be participating in meetings with these external organizations. It is important that no other leader's comments be disclosed if they may not reflect well upon our Medical Explorers. There may be times when our purposes and objectives don't perfectly align with those of the organizations we serve. Your job at this time is to collect information and bring it back to a forum where a response can be formulated that preserves our relationship with the other organization. At this point, **loyalty** to our Medical Explorers takes precedence over any loyalty you may have to the other organization. To do less means you're undermining our relationship with the other organization that will potentially hurt our Medical Explorer organization. We especially like for our members to develop a "passion" for some activity or group where we may be involved. Your "passion" is what makes you a great Medical Explorer leader, just be careful and do not disclose an opinion or comment that may damage our relationship with the other organization. Show your loyalty to other Medical Explorer leaders. Think about what the alternative means.

When representing our Medical Explorers to another organization, remember which organization you have been entrusted to represent.

In healthcare organizations, confidentiality is particularly important. Future healthcare professionals will eventually work in environments where protecting sensitive information is not simply courteous—it is a

professional and sometimes legal obligation. Learning appropriate confidentiality as a student leader is therefore part of your **learning professional behavior**.

Loyalty Does Not Require Silence

There is an equally important limitation. Loyalty should never become an excuse for concealing serious misconduct.

If an organization is violating university policy, misusing funds, endangering members, discriminating against individuals, violating the law, or acting contrary to its fundamental ethical obligations, loyalty may require a leader to raise the issue.

Disagreement Without Disloyalty

One of the marks of a mature leader is the ability to disagree without turning disagreement into a personal conflict.

Consider a leadership council debating a major project. One officer believes the organization should proceed. Another believes the project is too expensive. A third believes there are unacceptable safety risks. All three may be equally loyal.

Loyalty is demonstrated by how they conduct themselves. They present their concerns honestly. They listen. They avoid personal attacks. They do not secretly organize opposition while pretending to support the discussion. They accept the organization's legitimate decision-making process.

If the decision goes against them, they do not respond by hoping the project fails so they can later say, “I told you so.” They help make the adopted plan successful. That is professional leadership.

The Damage Caused by Organizational Disloyalty

Organizations are particularly vulnerable to behaviors that gradually destroy trust: gossip; criticizing fellow officers privately while refusing to raise concerns directly; withholding information another leader needs; taking credit for the work of others; deliberately allowing another officer to fail; and creating competing factions in which members begin thinking in terms of “our side” and “their side.”

Once that happens, leaders may begin evaluating ideas according to who proposed them rather than whether the ideas are good for the organization. The mission becomes secondary to internal politics. Strong organizations actively resist this development.

Loyalty in the Business and Professional World

Modern organizations increasingly depend upon teams rather than isolated individuals. Healthcare provides an especially important example. A hospital may require physicians, nurses, pharmacists, therapists, laboratory professionals, administrators, information specialists, engineers, technicians, and many others to work together.

No individual possesses all of the knowledge required to operate the system. The same principle exists in successful businesses. Leadership teams contain individuals with different expertise, responsibilities, personalities, and viewpoints.

These teams do not succeed because everyone thinks alike. They succeed because people with different viewpoints can trust one another enough to work toward a common objective.

Please consider this carefully. Medical Explorers leadership requires us to move beyond the interpersonal habits of high school and adopt the mature standards expected in professional organizations. Your Professional Life began when you became a Medical Explorer. Everything you do is expected to be “professional.” That includes obligations you have to other Medical Explorers. Please move beyond childish high school perspectives. How you treat other Medical Explorers is to show “adult,” professional, and mature behavior. “Respect” for all is “Expected.”

For future healthcare professionals, learning this type of organizational loyalty during college can therefore become part of your professional preparation.

Leadership Is Not a Resume Line

Students preparing for medical school and other healthcare professional programs understandably want to demonstrate leadership. The mistake is assuming that the strongest application is created by accumulating the greatest number of officer titles or membership.

Current AAMC guidance points in a different direction. In the AMCAS Work and Activities section, applicants may enter up to 15 experiences, but the AAMC explicitly instructs applicants to enter only significant experiences because medical schools are interested in **“quality rather than quantity.”** Applicants may identify up to three experiences as most meaningful and are encouraged to discuss the experience’s transformative nature, the impact they made, and their personal growth. [3]

This is where our Medical Explorer Resume becomes important. Your Medical Explorer Resume is designed to record and save your “most meaningful” experiences. Well written Medical Explorer Resumes (follow the guidelines in our Standard Operating Procedure) can make completion of a professional school application easy.

AAMC guidance also states that admissions committees are particularly interested in sustained, long-term activities and experiences involving significant time commitments that develop transferable competencies. [4] By “transferable competencies” they mean experiences that you will carry through the professional school and into your professional life.

Another AAMC resource advises students not to pursue activities merely because they believe those activities will look good to medical schools. It emphasizes sustained commitment, noting that regular involvement is more likely to produce significant responsibilities and genuine leadership opportunities. [5]

This is not merely an AAMC administrative preference. Individual medical schools express similar expectations. Weill Cornell Medicine, for example, states that its admissions committee is interested in meaningful extracurricular participation demonstrated by commitment over time, leadership roles, and accomplishments, and distinguishes meaningful participation from perfunctory participation. [6]

Breadth of experience is valuable. Accumulating titles is not the same thing as demonstrating leadership.

A student who holds officer positions in several organizations may indeed be an excellent leader. Multiple positions are not inherently negative. However, the important question is whether the student can demonstrate meaningful contribution, sustained commitment, responsibility, accomplishment, and growth in those positions.

For an officer in a university organization, accepting a title primarily because it may look impressive on a professional-school application creates another problem: **the title carries obligations to other people.** Fellow officers and members depend upon that individual to attend meetings, complete assignments, communicate, solve problems, and fulfill the duties of the office. You may be asked a question during an interview where you will need to answer how you fulfilled the duties of the office and what significant contribution did you make.

A leadership position therefore should not be treated simply as an item acquired for a résumé. **It is a promise of service.** An Admission Committee member may be looking specifically for the “service.” They know the game of multiple organizations well. Carefully consider what you include on a professional school application.

The Admission Committee knows that you have “Responsibility” to the organization. Multiple activities are not inherently a disadvantage. The important question is whether the applicant can demonstrate meaningful contributions, sustained commitment, accomplishment, and personal growth through the activities listed. **Think about it!** Members of the Admission Committee have been where you are today. They know the demands upon you for academic excellence. They know the time you should be giving to study. They know the time leadership, or even normal participation should require if you are involved in a significant way.

Leadership accumulation asks: “How many titles can I list?”

Leadership accomplishment asks: “What happened because I accepted this responsibility?”

For a Medical Explorer preparing for medical school, a sustained leadership experience can provide a much richer account than a list of titles or organizations.

The strongest question may therefore be the simplest:

Was the organization stronger because I served as one of its leaders? How did I help make the organization better? Did my actions contribute to improved health or wellbeing of those we may have served?

These questions connect your preparation for professional school admission directly to an organization, its purpose, and your **Loyalty** as a leader.. An officer who accepts responsibility and then divides their attention among many organizations or leadership positions, where their commitments cannot be confidently fulfilled, may have gained another line on an application but weakened the very evidence of dependability, reliability, teamwork, service, and leadership that the title was supposed to represent.

Do not underestimate the experience of members of the Admissions Committee. Its members understand the demands on a pre-health student and can recognize when a list of activities reflects meaningful commitment, and when it may simply reflect application padding.

They know that there are only so many hours in a day, and that the type of student they are looking for is the type who can balance their academic time with their time contributions to an organization that allows them to invest in others – the health or well-being of others – the essence of what a future health professional should have as their goal. Members of the Admission Committee can all recognize the “Application Game” of padding an application with meaningless leadership titles an organizations.

The goal should not be to discourage students from participating in multiple organizations. Students should explore different interests and develop a broad range of experiences. **The goal is to teach a professional principle: never accept a leadership responsibility unless you are prepared to give that responsibility the time, attention, and loyalty it deserves.**

Loyalty is Reciprocal

An organization that expects loyalty from its leaders must also demonstrate loyalty to them. Leaders should support one another, defend colleagues against unfair criticism, provide assistance when someone is struggling, recognize contributions of others, communicate honestly, and give fellow leaders a reasonable opportunity to explain their decisions or mistakes.

Loyalty cannot operate in only one direction. A leader should be loyal to the organization, but a healthy organization must also demonstrate that it values the people who give their time, energy, and talents to its mission.

This does not mean protecting someone from the consequences of misconduct or poor performance. It means treating people fairly, giving them the opportunity to improve, and remembering that servant leadership includes responsibility for the people we have been entrusted to lead.

Loyalty and Servant Leadership

Loyalty is closely connected with an important leadership style strongly encouraged by our Omega Leo Medical Explorers - Servant Leadership. A servant leader does not ask primarily, “What authority do I have?” The servant leader asks, “What responsibility have I been entrusted with?”

Leadership positions should not primarily be viewed as rewards. They are opportunities to assume greater responsibility for other people.

The president has responsibilities to the officers. The officers have responsibilities to the president and to one another. All leaders have responsibilities to the membership. And the entire organization has responsibilities to the community it serves. Loyalty connects these relationships.

A Scout Is Loyal

For our Medical Explorer organization with a Scouting heritage, there is also a familiar reminder of this principle. The Scout Law clearly exhibited on our website includes the statement, “**A Scout is Loyal.**” This is just one of the twelve words we consider important to all Medical Explorers. As an officer, or prospective officer, you should carefully examine these twelve words to see if you are a match for what our Medical Explorers stands for and the leaders we need to manage this large and complex organization.

The Loyalty concept requires very little elaboration to be meaningful. Loyalty means being faithful to legitimate commitments, standing by those who depend upon us, and accepting responsibility for something larger than ourselves. You will hear a lot about our expectation for Reliability.

But even within this tradition, Loyalty should never be interpreted as unquestioning obedience to an individual. For university students preparing for professional careers, the broader lesson is more important:

Be the kind of person other people can trust.

The Responsibilities of a Loyal Leader

1. **Put the mission first.** Decisions should advance the legitimate purposes of the organization rather than personal status, friendships, or individual advantage.
2. **Keep commitments.** When you accept responsibility for something, other people should be able to depend upon you.
3. **Speak honestly.** Loyalty requires truthfulness, including respectfully delivering information that other leaders may not want to hear.
4. **Disagree professionally.** Challenge ideas without attacking people.
5. **Respect legitimate decisions.** Participate fully in deliberation, but once a proper decision has been reached, work constructively toward its success.
6. **Protect appropriate confidentiality.** Leadership information should never become currency for gossip or personal influence.
7. **Give credit to others.** Successful leaders do not need to claim every accomplishment as their own.
8. **Never deliberately undermine another leader.** If another officer is struggling, help that person succeed whenever possible.
9. **Raise ethical concerns.** Loyalty to an organization includes protecting it from misconduct, unsafe practices, and violations of its principles.
10. **Accept only the leadership responsibilities you can fulfill.** An impressive title is not a substitute for meaningful service. Do not over commit merely to accumulate credentials.

11. **Prepare the next generation of leaders.** The ultimate test of leadership is not whether an organization depends upon you, but whether you leave it stronger when you are gone.

Leadership Is Temporary—Character Remains

Every officer of a university student organization eventually leaves office. The president eventually becomes a former president. Officers graduate. New students arrive and assume leadership.

The question then becomes not simply what position a person held, but what kind of leader that person was while holding it.

- Did people trust you?
- Did you keep your commitments?
- Could other leaders disagree with you without becoming your enemies?
- Did you protect the organization when doing so was difficult?
- Did you help other people succeed?
- Did you give your leadership position the time and attention you promised?
- **Did you leave the organization stronger than you found it?**

These questions ultimately matter more than the title printed beside someone's name.

Leadership provides authority for a limited period of time. Loyalty builds a reputation that can last a lifetime. What will be the legacy of you time as a leader? Have you met your responsibilities to officers who may have preceded you? Have you shown respect for those officers who preceded and will follow you? They, too, have an investment in our success.

For a university **organization** preparing students for careers in healthcare and other professions, these may be the most important leadership lessons we can teach.

The goal is not to produce leaders who simply follow. The goal is to develop leaders who can be **trusted**—leaders who think independently, speak honestly, serve faithfully, respect their colleagues, protect their organization, honor the commitments they accept, and remain committed to a mission larger than themselves. **Our goal is to prepare our leaders to become trustworthy professionals.**

The professional school Admission Committees are looking for evidence that your leadership or participation has made a difference. They want students admitted to their programs who can be expected to make a difference as a future health professional. They are reading between the lines to find the very best applicants who have the character they want as future students. Consider your participation and leadership carefully. Make your decisions with the wisdom the Admission Committee is searching for!

References and Further Reading

[1] George Washington's Mount Vernon. "Resignation of Military Commission." Washington resigned his commission to Congress on December 23, 1783.

[2] George Washington's Mount Vernon. "The Farewell Address." Washington chose not to seek another term after two presidential terms.

[3] Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). “Section 5 of the AMCAS Application: Work and Activities.” Current guidance states that applicants should enter only significant experiences and that medical schools are interested in quality rather than quantity.

[4] Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). “Restarting Your Journey to Medical School.” Discusses sustained, long-term activities, significant time commitment, and transferable skills.

[5] Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). “Getting Into Medical School: AAMC Resources and Services for Premed Students.” Advises students not to pursue experiences merely because they think they will look good to medical schools and discusses sustained involvement.

[6] Weill Cornell Medicine. “Selection Criteria and Requirements.” Describes meaningful extracurricular participation in terms of commitment over time, leadership roles, and accomplishments.