

# BEYOND THE MASK INTERVIEW

## Dr. Viren Naik



*Interviewed by Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, BA, MBA, DM, CMC, BTM Strategic Consultant, and Emily Hill, the Section's Administrative and Communications Coordinator*

Dr. Viren Naik, currently Director of Assessment at the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, is a high-profile leader in simulation training and education. Most notably, in 2009, having established a reputation as an innovative thinker about medical education and particularly the role of simulation, he was recruited as the inaugural Medical Director to establish the University of Ottawa's Skills and Simulation Centre (uOSSC). He went on to become the Vice President of Education for The Ottawa Hospital where one of his areas of interest was leading interprofessional education initiatives to enhance the learner experience and improve quality and safety for patients. Jane and Emily sat down with him recently to discuss his leadership journey and some of the lessons learned along the way.

Viren describes figuring out his fit with anesthesiology early in his medical training. As part of completing his medical school and residency training at The University of Toronto, he had realized quickly that anesthesiology was different from other rotations, "...when it came the anesthesia, I was actually kind of waking up before the alarm and was happy to be there early and stay late."

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*"Seek from the get-go what fits and what you love"*

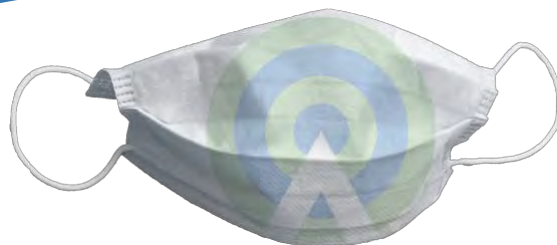
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He was also aware at an early age of his interest in teaching. Having enjoyed coaching sports all through high school, he was drawn to the great teachers in Medical School and Dr. Richard Reznick in particular, a juggernaut in medical and surgical education. Recognizing a kindred spirit, Dr. Reznick recruited Viren into the Wilson Center for Research and Education telling him "...what we're doing here is actually pushing beyond teaching. It's really about looking at the way we educate physicians, challenging existing paradigms and the way we do things." That was where Viren, with co-supervision from Dr. Patricia Houston, began his study of the role of simulation, challenging many existing practices from the standpoint of an anesthesiologist. He was drawn to academic medicine and the opportunity presented to be at the forefront, breaking new ground.

Viren is of the view that *leading is not optional for physicians*. He describes leadership as the role of influencing others, something that physicians do on a daily basis. There are different kinds of leadership for different situations and leadership can shift among players, particularly in a dynamic environment such as the OR, "...collaborative leadership is something we all need to demonstrate in the operating room, and that's really about listening to others, leading from behind when the time comes, leading from the side and then, really leading from above when necessary. There are times where we have to shift into that 'command and control' kind of format of leadership. My concern is that sometimes that command and control type of leadership is mistaken as the kind of leadership that always needs to be displayed."

If leadership is not optional for physicians, then getting good at it for Viren requires three actions:

- *Acknowledging what it takes* - understand the currency of the world in which you want to have an impact. In academic medicine, it is degrees and research output. So, in 2001, he obtained a Master of Education degree from UofT and a Fellowship in Education from The Wilson Centre for Research in Education. Viren attributes significantly accelerated opportunities in his career to his research experience and higher education, "I think that opportunities presented because I have the credibility of understanding concepts of validity, reliability and other things learnt through the course of my graduate training and research."



- *Stepping up when presented with opportunities* - Dr. Jack Kitts, a fellow anesthesiologist and CEO of The Ottawa Hospital, together with Dr. Jim Worthington, then VP Medical Affairs of The Ottawa Hospital, encouraged Viren to do his MBA, “You have to stand up and take notice when someone in authority is asking you to be a leader because that’s a real marker of whether you have leadership competencies.” At first, Viren was resistant given he was juggling clinical and family obligations and it was only much later that he says he understood the value of the degree, “Effective leadership is about that ‘below the waterline stuff’: the politics, how to manage our team, how to harness people with different bandwidth and strengths, how to play to their strengths. I learned all that from being immersed in it for two years.” And while an MBA is still very niche for doctors, Viren believes that it will be an important credential for leadership moving forward, “the competencies that are required for our health system transformation may be garnered through an MBA as well as that credibility to solve complex and challenging problems.”
- *Being willing to ask for help* - being coachable and actively seeking out mentors are critical parts of learning to lead well. For Viren, the mentor-mentee dynamic is a special relationship formed in many different ways: “I think that there has to be some degree of fit between the mentor/ mentee professionally and personally. And I think the mentor is not going to be able to help the mentee with every problem. I’d argue that you actually need a board of mentors, a council you use interchangeably depending on what it is you’re trying to work through.” Even though anesthesiology is Viren’s career, his mentors aren’t exclusively anesthesiologists, “I think it’s important for perspective, especially when you’re talking about going *beyond the mask*, to have mentors who may see things through a different lens.”

Viren’s final message is about *taking ownership of your leadership journey*.

The journey starts with self-awareness and knowing what is important to you which includes, as a physician, taking care of your mental and physical well-being. Viren describes really enjoying his experience at The University of Toronto and attributes the diversity of UofT’s associated hospitals to influencing his education experience and also helping shape him as a well-rounded physician, “I would argue that medical school is an important place to start to appreciate and strike the work life balance that you need for a sustained career in any discipline. There are so many outlets and options and opportunities to be involved in extra-curricular activities.”

Further, he explained the importance of physicians seeking out ways to diversify and advance their work, “For physicians, some of the issues related to burnout are the realities of the monotony and the repetition of doing the same thing, which the general public doesn’t necessarily experience. And what I would say about volunteerism whether it’s in academia, your community, in your cultural community, I think that all physicians need some other outlet to diversify their work and their interests.”

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*“I think that if you approach leadership as trying to climb the ladder or through your own personal glory, you’re bound for failure. I’m always drawn to the Harry Truman quote, “it’s amazing what you can accomplish when you don’t care who gets the credit.” And that really has to be where a leader anchors themselves in a greater purpose, as opposed to their own self adulation and self-promotion.”*

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Dr. Naik has been a true example of going *Beyond the Mask* over the course of his career, exemplifying leadership and innovation towards the advancement of physician education. We thank him for his thoughtful perspectives on leadership and wish him the very best in his new role with the Royal College.

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