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Topics in Cancer Prevention: Using "Secret Super Powers" to teach multidisciplinary team science and professional management skills

SHINE CHANG*, ASHLEY J. HOUSTEN, MELINDA YATES

Over time, the leadership model for functional units delivering cancer care and forging discoveries in cancer research has evolved from one organized around a single omniscient doctor or principal investigator to one that is team-oriented often with complementarily trained leaders. During this evolution, inclusion of professional skills useful to team science as an organized curricular emphasis has been uneven in the educational preparation of the oncology workforce. Gaps range from orientation to the types of skills useful for team work, to opportunities to practice these skills under instruction, and to getting feedback on performance.

Our graduate course, "Topics in Cancer Prevention," includes a team project to develop a research proposal presented at the end of the semester. Within parameters of an Request-for-Applications focused on a cancer prevention topic developed by instructors, assigned multidisciplinary teams negotiate their own research question to address and then form specific aims, background, significance, materials and methods, ethical considerations, and other components considered in National Institutes of Health grant application review. To help develop team science and professional skills, we assign each student team member a unique "secret super power" (SSP) that they activate during team meetings and in-class team work periods. We provide articles about each color-coded SSP from the business and management literature: 1) Resolve Conflicts/Persuasion; 2) Constructive Feedback; 3) Decision-making; and 4) Delegation/Management. During one mid-course session, students sharing the same SSP meet to discuss strategies and barriers to using their assigned SSP. The previous year's course debrief ("Tips for students in the next year's class")suggests that students utilized strategies (e.g., staying on task, eliciting expertise from team members tactfully, using an online folder to foster individual contributions) to enhance collaboration. Students appeared to enjoy the meta-learning experience and understand the relevance of developing these skills to their future work with oncology teams.

*UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MD ANDERSON CANCER CENTER, CANCER PREVENTION RESEARCH TRAINING PROGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF EPIDEMIOLOGY, 1155 PRESSLER ST, HOUSTON, TX 77230

email address:SHINECHANG@MDANDERSON.ORG