

Leader Profile



Jandel Allen-Davis, MD

President and CEO, Craig Hospital



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– Jandel Allen-Davis, MD



WittKieffer is proud to have served Craig Hospital in the recruitment of its CEO.

Leadership Involves Walking Through Open Doors

Jandel Allen-Davis, MD, became CEO of Denver's Craig Hospital in 2018 after a long clinical career in obstetrics and gynecology and, more recently, as Vice President of Government, External Relations and Research for Kaiser Permanente Colorado. Craig is a world-class rehabilitation hospital caring for patients with brain and spinal cord injuries, and Allen-Davis had little prior experience in this area. What she did have was an understanding that leadership is a learning process, a team sport rather than an individual pursuit, and that there is no such thing as perfection. In the following interview, she shares insights into how she became a leader (by intention as well as by happenstance) and how she learned to walk through doors that were opened to her.

Q: How did you become a leader? What's been your recipe for professional success?

Allen-Davis: The question implies that there's a deliberateness about being a leader that is not always the case. In some ways it's accidental and in some ways it's intentional. I backed into being a CEO over a long, long career, whether it was high school student council, college leadership opportunities, being a chief resident or through a myriad of more formal managerial leadership roles.

Leadership is a journey. If you show up, are present, work hard, and have the good of an organization or a piece of work at the core of what you do, there's always somebody who's watching you. You get plucked to do more and more things. The universe opens doors.

Q: As a CEO, how much do you draw from your clinical experience?

Allen-Davis: I practiced for 25 years and it was the most rewarding work I've done, but also the most challenging because of the risk of harm to patients if not done well. I have often said that if I ever slow down I'm going to write a book and title it, "Everything I learned about leadership I learned at the feet of my patients." I already have the chapter titles done and it covers topics such as the impact of distractions, the importance of self-care, understanding your role on the team, committing to lifelong learning and about eight others. I try and live by these even though the book isn't written yet!

Q: Are there advantages to having an MD as a CEO in today's environment?

Allen-Davis: Physicians bring to their work a cool combination of the ability to be super technical, because there is science to learning and the requirement to keep up with the field of medicine, but also a huge dose of art in caring for patients. They understand the big picture as well. I remember back in 2009 when I said goodbye to all clinical medicine and became the VP for Government and External Research at Kaiser Permanente, I still had to figure out, is there blood on the floor? In other words, is this an emergency, life or death? Does a situation require the kind of attention where you drop everything you're doing and focus on it or not? If the answer is no, then you have the time to engage others and take time in solving the problem.

Q: What leadership skills or strategies do you rely upon most in your role?

Allen-Davis: Interestingly, humor is one—not silliness, but the idea of fun and joy in work.

Inclusiveness is another. I'm an inclusive leader, and I think people appreciate the chance to help me to make things better together.

Coaching and mentoring of team members and others are important. I'm a relational leader, and people come to me and say, "You're visible. We see you a lot." That's a tough thing to balance in a crazy, busy day to make sure you get enough time with your team, with patients and their families.

I'm blessed with the ability to think in systems. That keeps me from making decisions that don't take into account multiple points of view.

And lastly, hard work. I'm willing to roll up my sleeves. I don't say, "That's not my job." I try to run my team as a team of equals.

Q: Please complete (and elaborate upon) the following phrase: "Good leadership requires . . ."

Allen-Davis: Humility. I think that word encompasses so much. What humility requires is you to put your ego aside, including your need to be right or to show up in a way that protects you from the absolutely vulnerable moments. Humility allows you to say, "I don't know and I could use some help figuring this out." When people see you being you, it gives them permission to be them.

Humility requires you to say when you're wrong and have the ability to apologize. Because of this, you've got to exercise your human resilience and self-forgiveness. I often say to myself: "My impostor syndrome is raging today! When are they going to figure out that they gave an OB/GYN the job of running Craig Hospital?" Forgive yourself; at the same time, applaud when you do things well. All of that is under this notion of humility.

Q: Finally, what's the best career advice you've ever gotten?

Allen-Davis: It breaks down on gender lines. Women often feel that doors don't open until you're ready. There are times, especially for women, when you feel the need to check 70 boxes before you can walk through open doors and see the opportunities sitting in front of you. The piece of advice that only recently I've taken to heart is, if there's something you think you might want to do, and have a passion for and have some of the skills, go for it. You might not get the job, but you'll learn about yourself and you've put yourself out there. You've signaled to the universe and others that you're ready to do more. That's why I'm sitting in the CEO chair today.