

## Leader Profile



### Traci Spray d'Auguste

Chief Operating Officer,  
University of Florida Health



You see the truer self in a crisis.

– Traci Spray d'Auguste



WittKieffer is proud to have supported the recruitment that brought Traci Spray d'Auguste to UF Health as COO.

### Leadership Lessons from a COVID Command Center

Traci Spray d'Auguste started as COO of UF Health Shands in December 2019, with responsibility for the operations of the academic health system's Gainesville, Florida hospitals and programs. Three months later the COVID-19 pandemic hit, redirecting much of her work. d'Auguste helped launch the organization's COVID command center and found herself getting to know colleagues across the organization much more quickly than she anticipated, whether huddling in person or virtually each day. In the following conversation, d'Auguste considers the challenges, and rewards, of learning a new job amid a global pandemic.

**Q: What have you learned from running the command center? What's gone right?**

**d'Auguste:** Normally when you open a command center it's for a finite time—a few hours, a day, maybe four days. Never has there been a time where we've had the command center open for weeks and months at a time like this. One success we've had was initially making it very clear that decisions were to be made by and from the command center. Everything related to COVID-19 needed to flow from the command center in a centralized and organized way. Individual departments may have been well intentioned to try to make decisions on their own, but we needed to make sure we had close, tight awareness of all that's happening, all the issues, and to make decisions and provide answers consistently across the organization.

Another success has been assisting in managing the overarching fear that people have felt around COVID. The world is a pretty small place and everyone is talking to their colleagues all over. They saw the pandemic coming, heard the horror stories, and it was important for us to manage that fear even before we had a significant issue in Gainesville.

Additionally, it has been critical to ensure we aren't operating in siloed ways and have cross functional discussions related to decisions from visitor policies, testing algorithms, PPE supply and distribution to patient cohorting. This work has allowed us to present unified messaging to our physicians, staff and students.

**Q: How did the onset of COVID affect the way that you got to know your colleagues and become acclimated to the organization?**

**d'Auguste:** I wouldn't wish the pandemic on anyone, but it's been a beneficial thing in that respect. I've learned more about this organization, its people, and the way we operate in a much faster time frame than I ever could have under normal circumstances. Living in the command center for many hours over weeks and months I have gotten to know people very well—how they behave in crisis. You start to learn the reactions—some calm and steady, some anxious and stressed; other people become closed off. It would have taken me easily two years to know some of what I know now.

The pandemic has forced me to build trust and relationships with colleagues very quickly. And I've met and learned from people on the University of Florida side that I would never have met otherwise—for example, collaborating with others in planning for students coming to campus and managing COVID testing for them. This crisis has brought together the university with the hospital in new, positive ways.

**Q: What do you learn about your team members during a crisis?**

**d'Auguste:** I tend to think you see the truer self in a crisis. When someone is stressed and really feeling pushed to the brink, that's when you tend to see the true colors really emerge. It's helped me to understand where certain people may need development; it's also helped me see the flipside of people who really step up and become unsung heroes. You think, wow, who knew that person or department had it in them?

**Q: As a leader, what have you learned most from managing during the COVID pandemic that you will apply in the future?**

**d'Auguste:** I think it is so important in situations like to this to understand the criticality of data and facts. People would hear stories and fear the worst from the pandemic. While it is important to have awareness that a surge could happen here and to be prepared, if we have 30 or 50 COVID patients in-house we don't need to act and respond as if we have 400. We've executed elements of our surge planning, but for the most part we have kept people focused and staying calm.

**Q: Lastly, any career advice you can share with other leaders?**

**d'Auguste:** For one thing, having mentors, and different kinds of mentors, is critically important. Another thing is this: As much as it's important to learn and recognize what you should do from good leaders, equally important is when you see poor leadership and learn what not to do. That needs to inform your leadership style just as much as the good.