

Leader Profile



Leader Profile:

Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D.

Executive Vice President for Medical Affairs, University of Michigan and CEO, University of Michigan Health System

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Creativity and risk-taking lead to powerful results

Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D., brings boldness to her leadership style, encouraging creativity and risk-taking within her team. “My job is to set the direction and make it safe for my team to be intelligent risk-takers,” explains Dr. Pescovitz. She believes the healthcare industry tends to be too risk averse. “Sometimes you have to fail in order to win. I encourage my team to take risks when it makes sense.”

Engaging and high-energy, Dr. Pescovitz thrives on the challenges of her position as executive vice president for medical affairs at the University of Michigan and CEO of the University of Michigan Health System. Recently she met with alumni and donors to discuss the university’s new North Campus Research Complex, designated to be used as a national research center and high-profile source of entrepreneurship and jobs. “We have the opportunity for the first time to have technology users working alongside technology inventors. All that mixing up will lead to an acceleration of discovery and creativity. For the state of Michigan, the results will be dramatic,” says Dr. Pescovitz.

Creativity is vital to this visionary leader. A natural teacher, Dr. Pescovitz synthesizes leadership into what she calls the 7 Cs: moral compass, compassion, contribution, commitment, communication, collaboration and creativity. While she admits that any of these can be difficult to achieve, she says creativity is the hardest one. “Creativity is essential to strong problem-solving. It’s what distinguishes the ordinary from the extraordinary.”

Dr. Pescovitz began her career as a pediatric endocrinologist, a position that brought her immense satisfaction in resolving problems for children and their families. “It’s a wonderful subspecialty,” she explains. “You have the opportunity to break down very complex issues and identify simplified solutions. My clinical work allowed me to ask interesting questions and gave me the freedom to explore.” Her clinical interests led her to become a nationally recognized expert in disorders of growth and puberty with nearly 180 research manuscripts and books published.

Prior to her Michigan appointment in 2009, Dr. Pescovitz oversaw dramatic growth as a research leader at the Indiana School of Medicine and promoted excellence in children’s health care as the president and CEO of Riley Hospital for Children. As the leader of the sixth-largest pediatric hospital in the U.S., she directed the expansion of services across the state. She also contributed significantly to the doubling of the medical school’s research grants and contracts. “The opportunity to participate in major advances in research, education, patient care and advocacy has been most gratifying to me,” noted Dr. Pescovitz about her accomplishments in Indiana when she was named among the “Top 25 Women in Healthcare” by *Modern Healthcare* magazine in 2009.

She calls herself a servant leader (a term coined by the essayist Robert Greenleaf) who “creates environments where people are able to thrive.” As she talks about her goals

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as a servant leader, different roles emerge and blend seamlessly. “As a physician, I learned how important it is to learn through observation. As a scientist, I know it’s important to acquire data, be objective, let experiments tell the truth and not let your preconceived ideas sway you. As a hospital administrator, I’ve learned how important it is to be a member of a productive team. As a mother of three children, my role is to create a nurturing, comfortable environment in which they will be successful. My leadership style is a culmination of all of these experiences.” As a servant leader, Dr. Pescovitz humbly describes herself as willing to be taught. “I don’t claim to be the smartest person in the room. That’s why I surround myself with experts.”

This accomplished leader acknowledges the importance of diverse mentors in her career development, which she charmingly refers to as her “mentor quilt.” Dr. Pescovitz explains, “No one person can serve all your needs. I have one mentor for research, one for clinical, one for work/life balance and so on. I keep the old ones while adding new ones to my mentor quilt. I never let them go.”

While working with mentors has been personally satisfying for Dr. Pescovitz, she expresses concern that mentoring should be spotlighted more as a career-enhancer. With the shortage of time and daily pressures, people are not volunteering to be mentors and many young leaders may not be seeking such guidance. “Mentoring should be emphasized more,” she says in regard to developing the next generation of healthcare leadership.

Her work at the University of Michigan is occurring in the midst of a dynamic and stressful environment. “Healthcare reform is a good thing and I applaud it even if the legislation is imperfect. However, all organizations will take a hit to the bottom line. There will be tremendous pressure to perform and focus even more on quality, safety, access, efficiency and efficacy.”

Looking forward, she believes that new skill sets and new knowledge are urgently needed. “We have to become more nimble, more cost-effective, more adaptable and just smarter,” explains Dr. Pescovitz. “Everything is changing, including medical specialties and the way we practice medicine. As the consolidation of hospitals and practices continues, the business end of medicine is becoming even more important. We can’t bury our head in the sand.” With Dr. Pescovitz’s uncanny ability to synthesize various ways of tackling problems, progress is assured.

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with the University of Michigan Health System on this important executive search assignment.

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