



How to Bring Oxygen to the Top of the Ivory Tower: The Role of Program Directors in Influencing Their Leaders

There is a saying in business: The higher you climb, the thinner the air. This concept implies that leaders are often operating in an oxygen-starved environment—making decisions based upon the limited information before them while being, themselves, far-removed from what is really going on in the front lines. This concept also applies to academics as well as healthcare systems. It is no wonder, therefore, that decisions get made that leave front line workers and middle managers scratching their heads wondering how such decisions were made.

PDs, in particular, are in a unique position within their departments. They straddle the fence between front-line worker and leader/manager. Through either their own direct involvement or through the involvement of their residents, PDs are aware of almost everything going on in the department. Yet, they also lead others—the learners, the coordinator(s), and sometimes other faculty. What is often lacking from the PD's repertoire, however, is the leadership of the people above them in the hierarchy.

The concept of “managing upwards” has numerous definitions but the simplest definition would be: the ability to help your leader make good decisions that benefit both you and your leader. To be effective at managing upwards, you must understand the competing interests your leader is trying to balance. While most faculty within a department understand their own departmental interests, few faculty really grasp the politics, interconnectedness, and environment in which departmental leaders make decisions—both those that affect only their own departments as well as those with broader reach. Without having walked in the footsteps of one's leader, we often have our own assumptions and misconceptions about those competing interests and how decisions are made.

This plenary will allow a look “behind the curtain” to expand understanding of how departmental leaders function within their own hierarchies, politics, and the broader organizational landscape. Participants will begin to understand how and which facts drive decisions. And participants will learn strategies so their unique perspective can help inform decisions made above them in their organization.